BURDENED FUTURES: EDUCATED DALITS' QUANDARIES IN CONTEMPORARY NEPAL

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Abstract

This article follows the individual pathways of young Dalit academicians, documenting their personal struggles as they strive for social mobility through education. It argues that choosing and shaping a meaningful life trajectory by a young Dalit in contemporary Nepal is a process entailing both individual and family visions, motivations, and economic capital endowment (in most cases the financial means are very restricted). Dalit students and young Dalit academic professionals experience numerous obstacles in their educational and professional pathways. They have to learn to overcome various social boundaries, to develop an impressive degree of personal resilience, and to forge interpersonal social ties. Young Dalit academicians are 'grounded' in the manifold senses of the term: first, educational courses continue to confront Dalits with numerous obstacles, especially lack of financial endowment and prejudice; second, the choice of occupation is difficult, given a pronounced lack of guidance and experience in academic social fields; third, individual well-being needs to be balanced against the quest for collective engagement. Yet another set of issues is embedded in the ongoing struggle of Nepal's Dalits to design effective modes of collective action in response to their continuing pronounced discrimination in contemporary Nepal. The individual choices are discussed against the backdrop of the thoroughgoing social transformations that have taken place over the last two decades. The text shows how modifications in value systems stressing the quest for social justice as well as the increased connectivity supporting new modalities of political activism have supported the Dalit struggle for recognition and social inclusion. At the same time, it is made visible how their aspirations and choices impact upon the pace and nature of these dynamics.

Key words: Social mobility, higher education, caste boundaries, activism, social reflexivity, politics of the self

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Introduction

The personal trajectories of Dalit youth in Nepal have been significantly affected by the thoroughgoing social transformations that have taken place over the last two decades. Young Dalits have been exposed to manifold changes shaping social relations, especially the transition from monarchy to a republican state, new economic opportunities abroad, as well as the transnationalization of human rights movements. Hence, modifications in value systems stressing the quest for social justice as well as the increased connectivity supporting new modalities of political activism (Gellner 2009) have supported the Dalit struggle for recognition and social inclusion. At the same time, their aspirations and choices impact upon the pace and nature of these dynamics. Dalit youth today are at a crossroads. The new social aspirations of those previously excluded are nowadays supported by new openings in the labour market and by the growing legitimacy of Dalit self-assertion. Powerful social boundaries, including caste boundaries, have become subject to social reflexivity and critique, but they have not lost their salience. Lived experience often stands at odds with such ideological notions as 'social inclusion' and 'political empowerment', because social mobility, such as Dalits entering social spaces previously closed to them, tends to trigger resentment on the part of members of the 'higher' castes—for instance at young Dalits' success in the NGO labour market and affirmative action provisions (Pyakurel 2011)—and even sometimes open conflict.

This article follows the individual trajectories of young Dalit academicians, documenting the personal struggles and turmoil involved when designing a meaningful path in life.[1] Choosing and shaping a meaningful life trajectory by a young Dalit in contemporary Nepal is a process entailing significantly more than individual (and one's own family's) visions, motivations, and economic capital endowment (in most cases the financial means are very restricted). Dalit students and young Dalit academic professionals experience numerous obstacles in their educational and professional pathways. They have to learn to overcome various social boundary lines, to develop an impressive degree of personal resilience, and to forge interpersonal social ties. Engaging in collective action appears as a natural course of life, but again, finding the right 'approach', as many interview partners have put it, does not come easily to them. Being 'grounded' in the manifold sense of the term, many young Dalits face difficult choices and manifold uncertainties, as I intend to show. The first set of questions centres upon the choice of occupation, where they must deal with a pronounced lack of guidance and experience in these new social fields. The second set of questions is thrown up by the difficult choices

they face between different dimensions of individual well-being as well as the thorny question of collective engagement. These choices are 'burdened' by different kinds of obstacle, continuing forms of oppression and exclusion, as well as dependencies that restrict the scope of aspirations and decisions. The third set of questions is embedded in the ongoing struggle of Nepal's Dalits to design effective modes of collective action in response to their continuing pronounced discrimination in contemporary Nepal. These choices are not made any easier by the fact that there are considerable differences among Dalits and *within* Dalit organizations and movements on these issues (see e.g. Kisan 2005: 135ff.).

An inquiry into Dalit life trajectories in the academic field means entering a relatively new research field (on student politics, see Snellinger 2018; on studying, see Koelbel 2013). Unlike in the case of Indian Dalits, research on the Dalits of Nepal is still rather scarce. Until 1990 only a few scholars conducted research in this field (Caplan 1972; Gaborieau 1977; Cameron 1998). In the last 25 years, the number of publications on Nepal's Dalits has increased markedly, centring on three topical lines: (1) the scope of caste inequality, Dalit discrimination, and exclusion (Aahuti 2014; Bhattachan et al. 2003; Pyakurel 2011; Kunwar and Ghale 2012), mostly concentrating on the situation in rural areas (Koirala 1998 being a notable exception); (2) short monographs on individual Dalit castes (see the SIRF series produced by the Anthropology Department of TU); (3) Dalit self-assertion in the fields of social movements and political activism (Kisan 2005; Vasily 2009; Kharel 2007), political processes (Khanal et al. 2012), as well as Dalits' carrying their concerns onto the public sphere (Onta et al. 2001; Vasily 2009). In recent years numerous policy papers and surveys have appeared especially in the framework of the Samata Foundation (www.samatafoundation.org) along with a growing number of journalist contributions (see especially the contributions by the Jagaran Media Center: www.jagaranmedia.org.np). These publications reveal the scope of recent societal transformations while emphasizing the magnitude of the challenges that Dalits still face. The rise of academically educated Dalits in Nepal is a new phenomenon; it is one of the important differences between the Dalits' situation in Nepal and in India where Dalit social mobility started significantly earlier on. Another novelty is the rise of affluent Dalit families (in particular those working as goldsmiths). None of this translates, however, into strong influence in the political field.

In contrast to Indian research, there is little intellectual debate on the scope and the form of the recent changes brought about by Dalit self-assertion and social mobility in Nepal (but see Kisan 2005; Vasily 2009; Gellner and Karki 2010). While

Jaffrelot (2003) claimed in the case of the North Indian Uttar Pradesh that a 'silent revolution' was going on in the sense of low castes challenging the power of established élites (for a critique of this approach, see Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008), nothing of this kind could be argued for Nepal. Rural poverty and caste discrimination—often taking on a violent form when people are attacked as representatives of their caste, suffering the perpetrators' quest to 'teach Dalits a lesson'—remain a social reality in most of rural Nepal; particularly in the Tarai (see e.g. the SIRF series for Nepal). A certain scope of social mobility is documented in this article, but it would be premature to infer that the rise of a small minority of educated and/or more affluent Dalits would translate into a significant change in the power structure. And yet: the trajectory from pronounced poverty, subjection to caste prejudice, and a lack of 'voice' towards individual and collective Dalit self-assertion and organization is highly impressive and has occurred at a breathtaking pace over recent years.

Can Nepal's educated Dalits be seen as revolutionaries? To a certain extent the answer must be positive: educated Dalit youth has experienced tremendous social (and spatial) mobility, reaching social spaces previously closed to Dalits and thereby challenging the status quo that was so thoroughly buttressed by the Hindu value system and elite interests. At the same time, they lack a crucial property of 'modal' revolutionaries: while they share the vision of an inclusive Nepali society and aspire for a social order that does not discriminate against Dalits, most young Dalit academicians are full of questions about how to work towards this change. A number of persons interviewed in this project voiced their manifold uncertainties and queries about how to act collectively and personally. 'Are we on the right path?' 'Am I doing the right thing?' were among the key questions discussed in the interviews. These uncertainties stand in striking contrast to their creativity and bravery in managing social mobility and in engaging in the collective project of shaping a new Nepal. This article traces young Dalit academicians' movements in Nepal's social spaces, documenting the striking mobilities in the sense of spatial, social, and ideational trajectories, while also documenting how individual pathways are burdened by individual, collective, and societal constraints and boundaries.

On the Persistence of Caste Hierarchy in Contemporary Nepalese Society

For many centuries Hinduism was a dominant force—numerically and ideologically—in Nepal. Hindu populations began entering Nepal's present territory already in the 1st millennium, heading for the Kathmandu Valley and moving from

the far west (Nepal's regions adjacent to Indian Kumaon and Garhwal) and proceeding towards the east. Hindus also entered the Tarai region of Nepal, known today as 'Madhes' from the south, settling there, while the malaria-infected forests were cleared in the quest for agricultural land, a process intensified throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The Hindus entering Nepal and spreading in the 'hill' region, the so-called Parbatiyas, belonged either to the two top ranks (the *tagadhari*s), consisting of Brahmins (in Nepal called 'Bahuns') as well as the Thakuris and Chetris (falling under the Indian term 'Kshatriya'), or to those castes classified as 'untouchable' (*pani nacalnya choi chito halnu parnya*) whose services according to traditional occupations such as smiths, tailors, and tanners and whose agricultural labour force was indispensable for high-caste landowners.

The drive towards the unification of Nepal, i.e. the conquest of c. 60 political entities that started in the year 1742 under the sword of Prithvi Narayan Shah, King of Gorkha, was partly instigated by the spread of Muslim rule and subsequently the East India Company's rule in the Indian subcontinent. Prithvi Narayan Shah substantiated his military move with his quest to create a 'pure Hindustan', where members of different castes and ethnic groups (whose living spaces his army conquered) would live in close proximity. In 1854 Nepal was declared a caste society in the sense that it was legally ordered according to rules of Hindu ritual purity. The Muluki Ain—as the civil code of Nepal is named—of 1854 has a national outlook, comprising almost the entire population living in Nepal's territory (newly delineated by clear-cut national borders: see Burghart 1994) within the Hindu framework of rules and regulations, while remaining sensitive to some cultural specificities and regional variations (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997). For instance, it brings at least three different caste systems together—those of the Parbatiyas, the Madhesis, as well as those of the Newars, allowing that particular occupational castes of low hierarchical standing have slightly different position ('impure and untouchable' vs. 'impure' but 'touchable') in the different orders. In all three orders Dalits are characterized by an internal caste hierarchy that has to an extent remained in place until today. The very fact that even some Dalits continue to endorse caste difference vis-à-vis those ranking below them worries Dalit activists.

It was only in the Constitution of 1962 that untouchability was declared illegal (especially putting an end to practices whereby ritual purification was required; still allowing for a number of punishing practices vis-à-vis Dalits, though: see Kisan 2005: 63). However, caste discrimination was not pronounced a criminal offence in this version. It was the Constitution of 1990 that finally declared caste discrimination and untouchability to be punishable criminal acts. A wide gap

between legislation and law enforcement remained. For instance, religious disturbance at places of worship continued to be an offence so that the traditional prohibition on Dalits entering Hindu temples effectively remained in force. The 2006 Interim Constitution is more outspoken on Dalit discrimination and protection than the previous constitutions. Article 13 endorses the Right to Equality, specifically naming the Dalits and other disadvantaged groups:

> (1) All citizens shall be equal before the law. No person shall be denied the equal protection of the laws. (2) There shall be no discrimination against any citizen in the application of general laws on grounds of religion, race, gender, caste, tribe, origin, language or ideological conviction or any of these. (3) The State shall not discriminate among citizens on grounds of religion, race, caste, tribe, gender, origin, language or ideological conviction or any of these. Provided that nothing shall be deemed to prevent the making of special provisions by law for the protection, empowerment or advancement of women, Dalits, indigenous ethnic tribes (etc.). (Interim Constitution, Article 13)

Furthermore, Article 63 regulated the formation of the Constituent Assembly, stipulating: "(4) The principle of inclusiveness shall be taken into consideration by political parties while selecting candidates pursuant to sub-clause (a) of clause (3) [geographical constituencies], and, while making the lists of the candidates pursuant to sub clause (b), the political parties shall ensure the proportional representation of women, Dalits, oppressed communities/indigenous groups, backward regions, Madhesis and other groups, in accordance with the law." This provision required the Constituent Assembly to admit Dalits, so that they ended up forming 12% of it. This was an unprecedented step towards the formal political inclusion of Dalits and it was followed by electoral provisions stipulating quotas for Dalits and others. Nevertheless, these regulations were not sufficient for Dalits to reach the top ranks in the political field (Khanal et al. 2012). The reasons need to be sought in Dalits' lack of strong networks within political parties, the largely clientelistic attitudes of Nepal's political elite, Dalits' lack of financial capital, the command of which continues to be crucial in political elections, as well as persisting covert symbolic discrimination.

The 2015 Constitution stipulated yet more pronounced legal provisions punishing discrimination against Dalits. Article 24 states:

> (4) There shall not be any racial discrimination in the workplace by indulging or not indulging in untouchability. (5) All forms of untouchability or discrimination contrary to this provision shall be punishable by law as a serious social crime, and the victim of such an act shall have the right to compensation as provided for by law. (2015 Constitution, Article 24)

Yet, a huge gap exists between legal provisions and the means to seek justice in contemporary Nepal (see e.g. NepalMonitor.org Blog; Kharel 2007).

While Dalit activism in Nepal goes back to the 1940s (Kisan 2005: 89), it gained momentum during the course of the Maoist mobilization—a violent movement resulting in social change, the degree of which cannot yet be estimated, but that certainly brought about far-reaching changes in the social values and norms that underpinned caste interrelations. Besides Dalit mobilization, the movement also instigated ethnic and Madhesi self-assertion and boosted women's rights struggles. Dalit activists differ among themselves in their assessment of the Maoists' importance for their movement. Nevertheless, the Maoists have certainly contributed towards changing the public understandings of caste hierarchy and social discrimination, exclusion, and social justice. They did so by bringing these themes to public attention and increasingly appointing persons of formerly excluded categories to their political ranks. Another boost in Dalit (and other 'excluded group') recognition was provided by the 'international community' operating via transnational civic networks (including the Indian Dalit networks) on one hand and the channels of international development aid and humanitarian assistance, on the other (Kharel 2007; Bishwakarma et al. 2007). It was the World Bank that introduced to Nepal the term 'social inclusion', at the beginning of the new millennium instigating research and projects geared at enhancing the life chances of the formerly excluded population groups. In 2005 the Norwegian government established the 'Social Inclusion Research Fund' (SIRF) that enabled numerous young scholars of 'excluded' backgrounds to conduct research highlighting the dimensions of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion in contemporary Nepalese society. The main impetus to the movement occurred through the ever-growing social movements and self-assertion of the 'communities' in question, among them the Dalits.

Vasily (2009) has described the interaction of INGO support and Dalit NGO mobilization as follows:

> A collaborative study, entitled 'The Dalit Mapping Study: A Joint Research Venture', conducted by the Dalit NGO Federation (DNF) and the International Labour Organization in 2002, discovered a recorded 600 Dalit NGOs (DNGOs). But the study went on to note, "The DNF, however, identified only 123 DNGOs spread in 31 districts of the country, and the whereabouts of the rest could not be established" (ILO, 2005). Compared to the 30,000 NGOs in Nepal as a whole, this is a minuscule figure. While some of these are grassroots organizations that languish in rural obscurity with meagre finances, the more high-profile NGOs are Kathmandu-based and primarily active in national-level advocacy. These are the DNGOs that are most involved in donor consultations and they receive more financial support than the rural NGOs. (Vasily 2009: 225).

In the meantime, the number of DNGOs has multiplied, but the tendencies identified by Vasily remain valid. These organizations continue to play a crucial role in bringing Dalit objectives to the fore and to voice critique of on-going discrimination and violence towards Dalits all over the country. The DNGOs have played a very important role in championing the Dalit cause internationally. In the meantime, Dalit problems have been 'mainstreamed' into numerous development programmes geared towards eradicating poverty and inclusion. Discrimination against Dalits has also been taken up by some civil society organizations dedicated to the realization of human rights in Nepal.[2]

As Vasily (2009), K.B. Bhattachan (2002), as well as numerous Dalit activists highlight, Dalit NGOs play a very important role in the absence of strong Dalit political (party) representation. They have managed to establish Dalit concerns within the national agendas and to attract substantial funding from international donors. Many problems remain unsolved, however. In the field of development Dalit leadership tends to be found only in project lines dedicated to Dalits. Many internationally funded organizations still do not employ Dalit experts, except in projects directly aimed at Dalits, and tend to be dominated by 'high-caste' experts.

The bulk of Dalit organizations are concentrated in Kathmandu, and their cause is not helped by the multiple lines of political alignment. Bhattachan (2002) and Vasily (2009) make the important point that the Dalit movement may to some extent be impeded by Dalit leaders having been 'co-opted' into the development 'scene' and in this vein 'depoliticized'. Bhattachan even speaks of "killing the [Dalit] movement" by "mainstream government and non-governmental organizations" (2002: 67). Vasily (2009: 227) comments: "There is a degree of merit in this

argument since, owing to the social conditions of their existence, Dalits qualified for political leadership or other forms of institutional responsibility, including research positions, are few. The relatively more lucrative opportunities offered by donor-financed activism has deprived the other spheres of qualified activists." It is important to bear in mind, though, that development assistance is indispensable for the poor sections of the population and requires highly skilled experts. Also, numerous development experts actively engage in Dalit politics at the same time.

Paradoxically, though, bringing Dalit grievances and demands more and more towards public attention goes hand in hand with the diminishing numbers of Dalit rank and file. Numerous Dalits have converted to Christianity over the past two decades; a number of Dalits, including educated Dalit professionals such as medical doctors, opt to hide their caste identity. Hence, collective action that aims to uplift the life chances of 'excluded' groups has to cope with countervailing different individual choices that may be considered detrimental to the collective struggle. These contradictory trends are among the many paradoxes and predicaments that Dalits face at present. Among these predicaments are the openings and closings that are part and parcel of Dalits entering social spaces that previously excluded them, social spaces where they formerly 'did not belong'.

Education is a case in point. In traditional caste society, Dalits followed occupations requiring many skills that were passed on from older to younger generations within the family. These occupations did not require formal education. Schools were scarce in Nepal, anyhow, and initially confined to elite children. When schools opened up, some Dalits took the chance, often facing detrimental treatment. More and more Dalit children have attended primary schools, but the level of drop-outs remains very high. Still today Dalit children face severe financial constraints as well as caste prejudice within school premises. Furthermore, many Dalit children cannot count on their parents' support in their learning process due to their parents being often uneducated, even if the motivation to have children educated is very much on the rise. Dalit children also mostly lack social networks that would provide assistance and orientation. It is not surprising, therefore, that only a very small portion of Dalit pupils continues on to university. Dalit girls are particularly affected (Bishwakarma et al. 2007).

Nevertheless, the number of Nepali Dalits enrolling in higher education has been growing, during the last two decades. Reservation policies play a crucial role, here. Dalits are mentioned for the first time in the Interim Constitution in the provision about special measures (affirmative action) for disadvantaged groups, though the language used in 1990 would also have covered them. Since 2007 the Government

of Nepal has provided reservations for Dalits in public education (admission and scholarships) as well as for employment within the public sector. The experiences with reservations are scarce so far, but some trends are visible already. Reservations enable Dalits to enrol in study courses that were difficult to attain beforehand (Pyakurel 2011). Informants judge that the number of students enrolled in medicine and engineering has increased significantly, this trend being helped by newly established scholarships. Private schools and universities are not included in the obligation to provide quotas, but there is a trend towards reservations for scholarships also in this sector, in particular because private schools and universities also receive small amounts of public funding, which compels them to abide by governmental rules. Besides, private educational institutions increasingly opt for 'diversity policies' that enhance their reputation. Some Dalits already managed to enter the governmental sector as professionals. They report very long procedures of appointment, though, as discussed by the two permanently appointed university academic staff among my interviewees.

While only a few Dalits have been able to enjoy the benefits of reservations so far, they have already became an object of resentment by members of higher castes (see Sunam & Shrestha, this volume); in this respect Nepali Dalits' experiences seem to replicate what has happened in India. Whenever the Dalit interview partners spoke about the reservations system, they immediately position themselves vis-à-vis the critical voices they anticipate. They see the reservations as their right to make good for the many dimensions of oppression and subordination. However, they also stress that, since the reservations came into existence in Nepal, the other avenues of entering the sought-after study courses and governmental positions were denied to them. If you are a Dalit, you will be channelled to the seats reserved for them, notwithstanding your achievement. As in India, the pathway through reservations is seen as detrimental to one's standing, denoting special treatment rather than 'merit'.

The 'First Generation': Revolutions in Personal Trajectories

In order to understand the scope of young Nepali Dalits' burdens, it is crucial to grasp the conditions and pathways for the rapid emergence of Dalits as students and young academicians and their entering the academic working force. They are often referred to as forming a 'first generation'. This is not entirely correct. Going back to the 1950s, one already finds some exceptional Dalit personalities who either managed to enter the field of (higher) education and/or to engage in politics, administration, or business. These personalities can all be listed by name, being so

few in number. And, paradoxically, some of the names do not immediately reveal their Dalit status because ‘social climbing’ and entering social fields previously closed to Dalits was only possible—and this remains partly true, even today (as discussed below)—by hiding one’s caste identity. Still, these few pioneers paved the way for Dalit social mobility in subsequent generations. Therefore, the term ‘first generation’ is correct in that the overwhelming majority of young Dalit academicians are the first in their families and their larger Dalit neighbourhoods to have managed successfully to complete their higher education (or even to pass their SLC exam).[3] Perhaps the term ‘Generation 1.5’ would be more appropriate, given that a small number of ‘uncles’ (indeed most of them were male) managed to obtain higher education in earlier decades.

Grasping the meaning of this achievement is not an easy task. Imagine the life trajectories of persons growing up mostly in remote rural areas of Nepal, frequently born into families disposing of very limited economic means and therefore at least partly dependent upon their landed patrons, with parents possessing very little or no formal education, and surrounded by a society considering it *obvious* that Dalits are different, ritually impure, and inferior. From these beginnings, the educational path leads to Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital that is still overwhelmingly the most common destination within the country for those seeking Master’s and doctoral education. A handful of Dalits (again, the informants are able to name every one of them) then proceeded to doctoral studies abroad (the main destinations being UK, US, Switzerland, and Australia). Today, a small (but visible) number of Dalit activists and professionals travel the world, attending conferences and engaging in transnational activist networks, often enjoying the support of renowned foundations or INGOs. Therefore, the personal trajectories tend to be characterized by a striking tension between an extremely underprivileged upbringing and the—still limited, but nevertheless quite substantial—possibilities opening up. The very rapid personal transformations occurring in these trajectories render these individuals resilient, while nevertheless leaving them with the sense that they lack a ‘proper grounding’. By ‘grounding’ they mean the crucial resources, i.e. cultural capital, that middle-class youths raised in Kathmandu have rather naturally obtained, through birth and through their social embeddedness in interpersonal networks. This cultural capital includes high-level education in the English language, the feeling of being modern (Liechty 2003), exposure to science and art, as well as availability of all kinds of information, including on possibilities for professional choices. Such resources were largely unavailable to Dalit children growing up in the countryside. While some of the interviewees come from rural families that were comparatively better off,

because their fathers served in the British Army and managed to invest in agricultural assets or small businesses, they also did not enjoy the benefits of the different forms of capital *in combination*.

Let us follow the trajectory of one young female Dalit development worker *cum* activist Parvati[4] who recently successfully completed her MA. The narration of her life course will highlight many typical experiences of the young Dalit academicians with whom I conducted interviews. In total, I interviewed 26 persons: 13 in two group discussions and 13 in individual interviews (of whom 6 came from Vishwakarma families and 7 from a range of other Dalit castes; 7 were male and 6 female, ranging between 21 and 34 years of age, with only one person above 40 at the time of interview). In addition, I spoke to three members of the older generation who had successfully completed their higher education about two decades ago. All the interviews were conducted in Patan (Kathmandu Valley) between March 2015 and March 2018. Some interviews were of a narrative type, but most partners asked for more structure through questions, especially in the initial phase of the conversations, which usually lasted between 2 and 3 hours.

Parvati grew up in a Pariyar (tailor-caste) family in rural west Nepal to a family disposing of a small plot of land and a few animals, while largely depending upon work for local 'patron' families who employed them as agricultural labourers. She enjoyed very strong familial support; this is a significant point that she has in common with the other interviewees. Some of them even speak of a 'sheltered childhood', meaning a loving household, full of encouragement and as much material support as the family could afford. The successful 'social climbers' all emphasized the importance of familial support while revealing mixed motivations for doing so: striving for the best opportunities for own children that are also seen as a chance to better the entire family's lot, while combining this effort with the quest to break out from the typical Dalit life trajectories characterized by poverty, lack of education, and very restricted professional choices. Parvati enrolled at a local school that her three elder brothers attended, successfully completing their schooling as far as the SLC. Despite their parents' support, all three brothers could not continue any further due to financial constraints, and left for work in the Gulf countries.[5] Again, this course of action is typical for many Dalits who embrace the option of labour migration to India, to Gulf countries, and (less frequently) to Southeast Asia. A pass in the SLC opens the door to skilled employment, for instance in Qatar, generating a better salary than is the case with the unskilled labourers. But most workers end up in blue-collar jobs, relying on a favourable exchange rate to generate the sufficient income to enhance the life-chances of their families.

Parvati faced many experiences that were typical for Dalit pupils at public schools in rural Nepal in the early 2000s (but this cannot be generalized for all rural areas, with striking examples of awareness reported for instance from some Kaski villages). She could not access drinking water unless the school peon agreed to pour it out for her. She was not allowed to touch the water vessel. Interaction with other pupils from other castes was easy unless food was being served. She was generally denied entry to fellow pupils' houses (on this point interviewees' experiences differ). Parvati recalls:

> So in school also, there is like bench, so we sit there and the teacher normally they don't want to touch us, no. So if they want to see our, if they want to check our copy [exercise book] then they ask us to put our copy here, on the table, then go. (interview conducted in English)[6]

Being a very good student (another recurring topic among my interview partners), she obtained small grants and enjoyed her teachers' support. But she also experienced Brahmin teachers whose demotivating attitude she resented: "She is from the Dalit community, it's, they cannot do anything to hold a good position. Because after this, maybe she cannot continue her education for higher education."

Parvati progressed to studying at the '+2'-level, which she combined with a teaching job. Her daily schedule at that period was as follows: walk 50 minutes to the college where she studies to attend classes starting at 6 a.m.; return at 10 a.m., again 50 minutes' walk, in order to teach the courses assigned to her at the local primary school; in the afternoon and evening, doing homework and preparing for classes. After the +2, she enrolled in a BA course close to the town of Pokhara. This was not what she had set her heart on. She very much wanted to study nursing and even obtained a place, but was not able to enrol due to lack of financial means. Instead, she took on the English language, assuming that this choice would enhance her chances in the labour market.

After two years Parvati shifted to a new primary school, which permitted her to cut down the commuting, but, once there, she faced a number of difficulties related to her caste background. Above all, the appointment procedure did not go smoothly at all. There were several delays. Apparently, the school authorities were reluctant to appoint a Dalit teacher, notwithstanding her scoring highest in the exam. She received a number of informal invitations for private talks with the school authorities as well as with her prospective colleagues. All of them conveyed to her

that she might not feel at home in a teachers' body entirely made up of colleagues from a 'high-caste' background. Brahmin teachers said:

> …it's not good, you, it will be difficult for you being as an individual Dalit teacher. Because there will be others, there will be Brahmins, so, so don't, it's not good to join.
>
> Don't you think that it will be difficult for you to exist in the school? Because our culture is like this. So, you'll be treated like different behaviour.

Time and again, Parvati felt that her prospective colleagues were trying to demotivate her. But: "At the time I was very bold". She resisted the attempts to get her to withdraw her application. Finally, the results were published. She had the top marks and she got the job.

After eventually enrolling, some of her fellow teachers, remembering her father who had attended this same school, felt unable to address her with the usual respectful *tapai*, and used *timi* (reserved for social inferiors and close friends) instead. (One of the other female interviewees—who moves effortlessly in circles of international endowments and INGOs—recounted that whenever Kathmandu taxi drivers learn about her caste, they start addressing her with *timi* as well.)

The hardest incident occurred when the school organized a picnic during Parvati's first year as a teacher. She was in charge and took responsibility, including for cooking the food for the pupils and their parents. Her food was refused by the high-caste parents, despite their respect for her position as teacher:

> Dalit, Dalit is there in the kitchen, so it's not good to have this food …most of the parents didn't want to have it because, it's (pause) because I was there.

The parents did not express overtly their reluctance to partake in food cooked by a Dalit, but rather opted for the excuse that "they were not hungry".

Parvati immediately entered into a prolonged debate on the spot, stressing that a school is a public premise and that her role as teacher is 'public'; therefore, she argued, caste should play no role. But for a number of parents taking her food was out of the question. Yet, as Veena Das put it (2007: 61), "Voice emerges at the moment of transgression." Parvati's stand on this issue was yet another articulation of her rapid trajectory. She was very aware that her ancestors had faced many hardships, whether for not sticking to rules of ritual purity, for talking back, or for glancing at Brahmins while eating, not to speak of love affairs with members of

higher castes. She embraced a universalist human rights discourse, not accepting even for a second her assigned and alleged inferior status. She was not prepared, any more, to accept the high-caste parents feeling uneasy and refusing her food. Having instigated the conflict (within the Hindu caste system of Nepal the ‘ritually impure’ persons are supposed to make sure that they do not ritually pollute those ranked above them) by cooking the food, she actively carried the dispute onwards, voicing her arguments and trying to convince the parents of her standpoint. She refused to give in. Having faced fierce criticisms both during the altercation and in the aftermath, she opted to change her place of work despite the difficulty of obtaining a better-paid position in a school located near her university.

A Brahmin mentor alerted Parvati to the possibilities of pursuing further studies, offering advice throughout. Having saved some money and with the support of her brothers still working in the Middle East, Parvati shifted to Kathmandu and enrolled in a Master’s course in in the field of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies at Tribhuvan University (TU). Always among the best pupils up to the BA level, she realized that most of her fellow students who had grown up and gone through schools in Kathmandu area had enjoyed a substantially better education and preparation (again something all interviewed persons bring up as a topic). (This problem is not confined to Dalits; it is common to all those coming from a rural background.) Parvati’s command of English—good by rural standards—is below average at TU, as are her marks throughout the entire study course. The need to spend much of her time earning money bears heavily upon her educational success: “They [her class mates of middle-class background] had many opportunities. But I didn’t have. I just came from a village-level school, so again it was very challenging for me to go along with other students.” She lacked all the forms of capital that Pierre Bourdieu discerned: her general education level was low, she lacked the cultural capital her urban fellow-students enjoyed, and she did not have a social net of persons who could give her guidance and support. Her financial means were restricted, being challenged by the necessity to buy a computer, and in the same vein as her fellow Dalit students (an ever-recurring theme!) she faced the problem of finding suitable accommodation due to the landlords’ unwillingness to rent rooms to Dalits.

Despite all this, university space turned out to be almost completely free of caste prejudice—an experience confirmed by other Dalit students. Parvati interacted freely with her colleagues, visited them at home, and shared food with them. With some embarrassment she mentioned that her family name does not openly reveal her Dalit background. She does not hide it, while also not bringing her caste-background

to the fore in social interactions. Despite the fact that it can be advantageous not to advertise one's caste background, she finds not revealing her own caste identity problematic. This is a delicate point: a number of Dalit students as well as academic professionals prefer to hide using a 'neutral' name. Some students perform this strategy actively, adjusting their name accordingly. Others take advantage of already having a name that does not identify them as Dalit. Most interview partners look back at a similar experience, narrowing down to 'almost without caste prejudice'. 'Almost' because many of my interviewees recount that they have faced difficult situations when pressed on their caste background by fellow students who are not able to 'place' them. Arjun, a 28-year-old teaching at the university, does not hide his Dalit identity, but he prefers to keep his identity undisclosed, if possible. According to him,

> those students who directly mention their name, nowadays they, they do not feel difficulties. However, most of the students fear a type of isolation among the colleagues, among the classmates who directly mention their name, surname. They are isolated. They do not have a lot of friends.

Like Parvati, he recalls moments of harassment and torment during his school years. His pathway is to support his own Dalit students while keeping a low profile himself.

Some interview partners report that fellow Dalit students expressed anger upon discovering that they are Dalits and accused them of hiding their caste identity. According to Dalit students, hiding one's Dalit identity at university is at odds with the Dalit quest for social recognition and more generally with generating a 'we-feeling' among Dalits and especially among Dalit academicians (e.g. important in their quest to enter the academic field and to render it a 'natural ground' for Dalits). In short, hiding one's Dalit identity is seen by numerous fellow Dalits as a betrayal. Secrecy with regards to what one is (in the sense of caste membership) impinges on ideas of morality that are connected to collective visions and to the ways that young Dalits fashion their ways of being in the changing social world of Nepal. Hiding one's identity is not only problematic because of the betrayal vis-à-vis the common cause, but also because it means breaking an alliance of joint action.

By contrast, those successful Dalits of the older generation maintain that they had to hide their Dalit belonging while studying and when obtaining their employment. They saw their life in hiding as the only viable strategy in order to be able to pursue studies, for instance, in engineering and medicine, and to find

appropriate employment. While the use of a name denoting Dalit identity would mean doing ‘the right thing’ in the field of identity politics, individual choices are often guided by individual strategies geared at not necessarily impeding an already hard educational and professional pathway.

Today, Parvati is a Kathmandu-based professional earning her living through employment with an NGO engaged in the field of protection of women—a typical professional path for Dalits who have graduated from social science or humanities courses (other Dalit students aspire for governmental employment, hoping that the newly established reservations will augment their chances). According to her, Dalit professionals find it slightly easier than members of other castes to find this kind of employment. While she enjoys her work, being proud of her success so far, she still feels that she has not yet “arrived”. As meaningful as her engagement in the development sector is to her, she aspires to further education at the doctoral level. With her stress on the importance of knowledge and academic achievement, she fits the pattern of most Dalit interviewees.

According to Parvati and to her fellow activists, Dalits lack both the information and the analytical tools to be able to grasp the foundations and modalities of Dalit oppression and discrimination. For her, knowledge is not primarily a tool for forging an academic career, but for changing the destiny of fellow Dalits in Nepal. While stressing the importance of knowledge, many interview partners suggested that it is something the Dalits are yet to acquire. As another informant has put it: “We need evidence”. Parvati wants to know what hinders Dalit women from obtaining good education, seeing education as the most important resource all Dalits can obtain, given the lack of economic means and limited ‘bridging ties’ between Dalits. The time she spent at university has provided her with knowledge, boosted her self-confidence, and provided her with a supportive Dalit network and some important social ties. She sees her opportunities as a moral obligation, and she aspires to be a role model for other Dalit woman.

The desire to know and to understand is a recurring topic in my conversations with Dalit interlocutors. It informs Dalit agency, their quest to form new subjectivities and to understand themselves as agents of change. On the personal level, knowing allows one to understand better the living conditions and reasons for obstacles that all Dalits face. Understanding brings one closer to the possibilities of counteracting those obstacles; and it also enables one to deal with discrimination and humiliation. At the same time, knowing allows for the possibility of political subjectivation in the sense of creating proper frames of action, acquiring the power of definition, and envisaging possible modalities of action. Having ‘command of

knowledge' does not merely open pathways to acquire even more knowledge, but it may also contribute to acquiring recognition from others. Knowing is also seen as pushing horizons, it is seen as a possibility to enter and to expand the social world that previously appeared as restrictive and tight. Moreover, knowing is an inter-subjective experience: thus, learning why Dalits are oppressed implies forging relationships with those who share similar experiences. Finally, knowing and understanding represent the fertile ground of everyday reflexivity, where creativity can materialize and open up new, as yet uncognized, possibilities.[7]

Parvati's educational history is unique, as is every personal story, while simultaneously displaying a pattern common among young Dalit academicians. It is mirrored by Rakesh's, Sazana's, and Arjun's stories, to name three further interviewees. Only a few of my interview partners were brought up in Kathmandu and went through education in Nepal's capital. As a rule, these persons were significantly more fluent in English than Dalit academicians brought up in the rural areas (with the exception of those who enrolled at English Studies departments). All my interview partners were the first in their family to have entered higher education at the BA level. Only a few reported that they did not experience caste discrimination at the primary level, while all concurred that the university (either the largest state university, i.e. Tribhuvan University, or the most renowned private university, i.e. Kathmandu University) offered them the opportunity to develop personally in a social space largely free of caste discrimination. This means having easygoing intercourse with fellow students, visiting them at their homes and sharing food, taking intercaste friendships 'for granted'. The majority highlighted that the social space of university even provided them with crucial support from socially engaged university teachers and peers belonging to castes considered hierarchically higher. While many of the interview partners had already joined the workforce (most already supported themselves through their higher education), the majority would maintain that they were still on their way to the occupation they desire (not surprising, given that most of the interviewees were below 35 years of age). Working in the sector of 'social inclusion' (especially geared towards Dalit issues), whether as development worker, political activist, journalist, or scholar, is the most common path. One interview partner was unemployed at the age of 40, hoping for a doctoral position abroad, and this person happened to be the only one seeking to pursue a professional path not directed at 'Dalit issues'. Two highly educated and politically very active professionals are self-employed (one a barrister and the other a language-school owner) while seeing their income as not adequate (given the duration of education, their families' aspirations, and in comparison to what can be

earned in the Middle East). All interview partners stressed time and again that their education was still on-going—notwithstanding their university degrees.

Parvati's and the other interviewees' educational trajectories need to be read against the backdrop of recent social changes in Nepalese society, revealing the significant scope of social transformation, but also a fair deal of reproduction of traditional patterns in the social order.

Professional Choices

None of the Dalits I interviewed was the child of academicians. One person had a parent with SLC (School Leaving Certificate). Most siblings did not enrol in higher education, with some of them migrating to the Gulf, among other things, in order to make higher education for their family members possible (through their remittances). Most interview partners added that Dalits had such restricted capital endowment at their disposal that education and knowledge were barely imaginable. Traditional Dalit forms of knowledge—along with Dalit traditional professions, in particular—were mentioned only occasionally,[8] for at least three reasons. First, Dalit professions, such as tanner, shoemaker, butcher, tailor, or blacksmith, denote low-caste status. Second, such professions are menial, whereas, in Nepal, the highest respect is reserved for intellectual work and white-collar occupations. Third, Dalit traditional professions are particularly prone to the challenges of globalized markets, whereas goods manufactured abroad convey modernity. Dalit manufacturers stand little chance in a market situation where economies of scale and 'modern' symbolization put their ventures under pressure, rendering them too simple, too 'local', even too costly. Members of the highest Dalit sub-caste among the Parbatiyas, following the goldsmith profession, also face competition from Newar goldsmiths, whose social status is comparatively higher. Entering this profession was and is risky, since, until a few decades ago, a Dalit goldsmith could not count upon police protection in cases of assault or theft. Currently, a number of Dalit goldsmiths have established their shops in urban markets, often drawing upon savings from labour in Gulf countries.

Many Dalits continue to find employment in the rural sector, though rarely disposing of sufficient land to make a decent living for the family. When asked, what would become of school drop-outs, informants usually stressed the option of going 'to the Gulf' as the first and preferred option (rather than agricultural work). Since work in Gulf countries requires a substantial economic investment (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993; Bruslé 2014), only more affluent workers are able to reach there.

Apparently, some Dalits manage to obtain loans from their former traditional patrons (*jajmans*) who are likely to ask for outrageous interest rates. Most Dalit migrants find employment in the more easily accessible informal sector in India (Thieme 2006).

Career pathways towards academic professions are still a minority option. How do these few Dalit pupils succeed? All mention the importance of family support (as Parvati's story already revealed). Values, encouragement, as well as pooling together financial means, are named as particularly important. At the same time, education can be the cause of conflict between children and parents in many families: many parents either fail to see the importance of education or cannot afford to send their children to school. Reportedly, inter-generational negotiations on this issue often put family relations under stress. Elder siblings emerge as very influential. In the recorded conversations they are often depicted as role models. Teachers are portrayed as gate-keepers and/or as gate-openers. It is not surprising that Dalit students or academicians, i.e. those who have managed successfully to overcome educational hurdles, all enjoyed their teachers' support and high esteem. But, as Parvati's story revealed, not all teachers and colleagues are prepared to accept that Dalits should gain a foothold within the educational realm.

Peers play an important role as well. Peer interactions have provided the interview partners with different degrees of belonging to the educational field. Some accounts reveal strong friendship bonds with children of higher castes who opened up new life spaces, buttressing aspirations. Invitations to high-caste family homes exposed them to new life-styles, be it in intellectual or in consumer choices. Caste inter-mixing often had a 'cosmopolitan' effect in the sense of the social world growing bigger and becoming more multi-faceted. Peer relationships among Dalits at school played little role, the school rather providing exposure to broader society. Some interviewees even expressed the sense of having been 'adopted' by their class-mates' families. In most accounts, however, these friendships faced barriers of untouchability at such public events as marriage banquets, or generally when food was being served. Peers are sources of comparison, either providing an idea of possibilities, or suggesting that powerful social boundaries would maintain the existing order. For instance, peer intercourse exposed many Dalit pupils to an affluence that was unknown to them beforehand: they could see a difference in the quality of clothes and even in the fact that peers were able to bring afternoon snacks to school while they had to go hungry before going home for supper. One interviewee evoked very lively images when describing her realization of her own poverty—for instance, discovering that her fellow pupils' lunch boxes were full of

cooked rice.[9] She stressed that, though she was poor and hungry at school, her attire was nevertheless always neat and clean: “We used to be very clean. Our clothes were ironed and clean. But people kept asking: How come that you are so beautiful when you are Dalit?” (Sazana). This also seems to be a common experience of young Dalits.

Some informants mentioned initially not knowing what to study and also being clueless regarding how to obtain the relevant information. Others had well-defined interests, but were unable to pursue the selected study course. Arjun, the son of an electrician running his own shop in a small town in the Tarai, planned to become an engineer, but despite his very good marks he was not able to pursue this path due to financial constraints. He then opted for English in his Master’s, simultaneously enrolling in social science in order to “understand why the Dalits were oppressed”. He is currently attending an MPhil course that is expected to prepare him for doctoral studies. This trajectory—that in this case already led to permanent employment at the comparatively young age of 28 (so far, there are two such cases in my sample)—is rather typical for the cases I collected, revealing a high degree of pragmatism in selecting study courses, with the main aim being not to follow one’s own predilections, but rather to find employment. It is also frequent that Dalits take on the burden of studying more than one course in order to have several options,[10] on the one hand, and in the quest to expand their personal knowledge base, on the other—a fact going far beyond a purely instrumental approach to education. Why these young Dalits take such burdens upon themselves requires further analysis. Probably this results from the anxiety about not knowing enough, paired with a moral obligation to study as much as possible and also with the desire to demonstrate aptitude.

All those below the age of 35 whom I interviewed for this project either were or had been enrolled in social science and/or humanities courses. There was just one exception, a student studying public health. The actual number of Dalit students cannot be known—with numerous students reluctant to reveal their identity—but it can be inferred that most Dalit students have so far opted for humanities and social sciences, including law, often due to the limited availability of financial means. Dalit informants estimated that the number of professionals and students in the fields of medicine and engineering has only recently begun to rise, thanks to the reservation system and to the scholarships Dalit students can acquire nowadays.

Until recently, dreams of pursuing cherished professions such as engineering, medicine, or nursing were quickly abandoned for financial reasons. Enrolling in the English Department was and continues to be a frequent choice. This is a pathway to

becoming a teacher; besides, a command of English is seen as an important asset for joining a development agency. A number of Dalit professionals work for INGOs in fields such as ‘poverty alleviation’, ‘human rights protection’, and ‘social inclusion’ as well as in Dalit activism. Informants vary in their assessment of the magnitude of this professional sector, but it is certain that since the mid-2000s a number of new fields of activity, new institutes, and new professional profiles have come into existence that are often filled by Dalit professionals. At the same time the interviewees complained time and again that despite international donors’ expressed willingness to employ Dalits, significantly fewer positions were actually offered to them than to other groups. They speculated that this was due to the predominance of high-caste Hindus in these organizations. While many non-Dalits assume that Dalits have an advantage in the ‘development market’, Dalits themselves stress that the new professional openings are limited in scope and, currently, are becoming fewer in number. These positions are very much sought after because they are comparatively well paid and come together with the social distinction of not just working, but ‘dwelling’ in an international field, meaning ‘exposure’ and even occasionally the possibility to travel abroad.

Work in the INGO sector brings yet another ambivalence to light, in addition to that described above. While working for the good of fellow Dalits in rural areas is considered badly needed and crucial, it also means being confined to a ‘niche’. The same holds for the hugely successful ‘local journalism’ such as ‘community radio’ that took up Dalit topics quite early on. In these occupations, provided they are confined to Dalit issues, Dalits have a kind of a monopoly while other positions are very difficult to obtain. Dalits are often asked why they are concentrating on their own issues, rather than engaging with ‘mainstream’ society (see especially my conversation with Sazana), the idea being that Dalits should broaden the scope of their intellectual and activist preoccupations. While this question is understandable in principle, two answers can be given. First, in comparison to other sections of society, very little is known about Dalits and, in particular, still rather little *knowledge on Dalits produced by Dalits* exists. Second, it is still difficult for Dalit intellectuals to participate in knowledge production about other societal groups.

A social-science background is a good foundation for applying for government jobs, but the competition is very stiff in this sector. Again, while numerous members from other castes seem to be envious of Dalit reservations, Dalits complain that reservations were of little help in entering public employment. There are a growing number of Dalit barristers, which is an obvious choice given the necessity to protect and defend Dalits, especially in caste discrimination cases. Combining politics with

law is a common option for those engaging in political work. The only barrister in my sample justified his study choice with practical considerations. Studying law was significantly cheaper than the study course he had envisaged earlier. It also meant that he could study while staying at home. As anticipated, his professional training required less investment which then resulted in less income and generated only partial employment. Becoming a lawyer is a step towards self-employment, i.e. depending upon a clientele largely lacking financial means. Apparently, Dalits embracing this profession are likely to combine it with other sources of income.

The success of self-employed Dalit academicians depends on their learned skills and certificates. A small (but ever-growing) number of doctors have already established themselves, but they usually hide their identity in order not to deter patients. A few Dalits run small firms, for instance specializing in language training. Most of them complain, though, of a very high workload and a low salary. Several interviewees have raised the question whether it was worthwhile going through higher education, and all the concomitant hardship they themselves and their families have had to face, when the financial returns have been rather meagre. Being young, the interviewees seemed to accept being still in the process of 'reaching there', but they have so far experienced this pathway as tough. And yet, studying appears as a very important choice, in order to be one of the Dalits present in the academic world (time and again, Dalit respondents proudly listed the number of PhDs from among their ranks, being able to count a low double-digit figure in 2015). Besides, doing something for future generations of Dalits, be it for their own children, be it for the next Dalit generation as a whole, was considered worthwhile. Reflection on their own professional trajectory tends to be interwoven with concerns for the lot and prospects of Nepal's Dalits at large.

As is the case in other parts of the world, there is a frequent mismatch between the duration of academic education and the rather low income in academic professions based on studies in social science and humanities. Since most Dalits come from (very) poor backgrounds, income generation is a very important element of their professional life. In several conversations Dalit academicians reflected upon their professional choices vis-à-vis those friends, colleagues, and family members who opted for labour migration. They claimed that a number of better-trained persons from their caste have managed to acquire white-collar or skilled blue-collar jobs in such countries as Qatar or Malaysia that provide them with a much better income than what an academician can earn in Nepal.

Notions of the Good Life: Individual Pathways and Collective Constellations: Transformative Politics of the Self

Capital—be it economic, social, or cultural—is what was not available to the interview partners at the beginning of their educational trajectories. All three forms of capital were very limited. Currently though, they are not only acquiring these resources, but even emerging as producers of these crucial capital forms, themselves becoming important nodes in social networks, helping their relatives financially and providing advice, while still coping with persistent limitations. Economically, the life chances of those Dalits who managed to complete their university studies seem to be close to those of members of other castes originating from rural areas, but this observation needs to be qualified. In order to substantiate it, more research (both qualitative and quantitative) is required. For instance, while the salary level may be equal, the availability of jobs may still depend on social capital that is not evenly distributed (see below), notwithstanding the 'social inclusion' sector open to Dalits. Dalit academic professionals are likely to receive less support—for instance, in kind such as food-stuff—from their families in rural areas, while being under more pressure to 'give back' to their natal families for their previous support during their education and to help their relatives more generally. Whether there is a (big) difference between poor rural Dalits and non-Dalits is yet to be measured, however.

Most Dalits decry the lack of Dalit unity evident in the manifold divisions among Dalits, especially by caste, by political allegiance, and by social networks. Nevertheless, there is a strong sense of common purpose and attention to Dalit concerns, especially to those experienced by particularly weak members of their society. Dalits have created strong social networks within their own 'community'. Dalit university teachers mentioned a number of times that Dalit students had gathered around them, asking for guidance and advice. All the interviewed Dalits are politically aware, many very active, and keen to learn more about Nepali Dalits' living circumstances and to understand the reasons and the scope of their discrimination and oppression. A number of organizations have been created that provide different kinds of support to Dalits. One example is the Professional Development and Research Centre (PDRC), dedicated to supporting Dalit students for short stays at universities abroad; another is the Samata Foundation that pools information, conducts research, and has become an important publishing outlet, which also offers young Dalits apprenticeships and a library. Numerous NGOs are dedicated to Dalit well-being.

Dalit social networks reach into all the mainstream political parties, into governmental bodies, into numerous welfare organizations, as well as into international organizations, the so-called 'donor community'. Recently, Dalit scholars started being appointed to permanent faculty positions, mostly via reserved seats.[11] The problem is, however, that only very few Dalits managed to climb socially into elevated positions. Dalits do not yet belong to Nepal's elite, even if a small affluent group has emerged among Dalits, and these families are clearly at an advantage in academic choices. For this reason, Dalit networks do not spread wide and high enough to make a substantial difference in the formal sector. While the enhanced chances of Dalits in the Nepalese academic labour market are visible, many posts are most probably still filled through *aphno manche* ('your own person' as personal links are referred to in Nepal) circles and above all by means of political party affiliation. The power of social capital holds especially for the private sector, whereas political party affiliation matters most in university employment. The former is also of importance in the development sector: Dalits claim that many positions in development agencies are given to members of 'high' castes, because they have personal links to employees already on the inside in key positions, despite a number of these agencies highlighting the importance of 'social inclusion' and 'diversity'. It is a matter of future research to establish how far Dalit networks reach across caste boundary lines. There are already some indications that at least some Dalits enjoy benefits from 'bridging ties'. The interviewees named numerous personalities of a non-Dalit background who served as 'gate-openers'. In particular, several university teachers, usually Bahuns, were named as either particularly dedicated to providing assistance to Dalits, or supporting good but needy students, regardless of caste background. But despite such openings, as one informant insisted, Dalits are in need of 'social bridges', which are still not available to them in sufficient numbers.

The production of cultural capital is a very important element of Dalits' 'migrating' into the academic field as well as into related fields such as journalism or activism that do not necessarily require higher education. Possessing cultural capital means access to education and knowledge; time and again Dalit interviewees highlighted the importance of knowing, while decrying the lack of knowledge among their own rank and file. It also means having access to information through the means of communication and printed materials. In the case of the Dalits, 'cultural capital' also means 'having' their own cultural forms and practices—still underestimated by many. Furthermore, it consists of knowledge about the forms and scope of their exclusion and oppression, including an analysis of reasons bringing

about and reproducing this state of affairs. Over the last years, the Dalit academicians have engaged intensively in (applied) research, uncovering many dimensions of the dismal living conditions in most rural Dalit households. It would also be interesting to establish how knowledge produced in the Dalit movement reaches and influences the 'Dalit community' and how 'Dalit knowledge' shapes Dalit movements. Subjectivities are formed through the Dalit struggle; they are negotiated in the framework of political parties and NGOs, partly underlying different logics. The Dalit movement is geared at resisting the power of others and as a vehicle to shape desires, subjectivity, and agency (Mosse 2010: 1170).

Besides striving to enlarge the scope of available knowledge, Dalit intellectuals also seek to engage in a theoretical search, especially in the field of the philosophy of knowledge. One interviewee, who had attended courses at the New School in New York, recounted how the study of Foucault helped her to understand how specific forms of knowledge are more likely to establish themselves than others. While she greatly benefited from this (additional) study course, she suffered at the same time due to her limited command of English as well as because of her inability—as she expressed it—to pose questions. To ask and to talk were depicted as properties not coming easily to Dalits. Arguing with and talking back to superiors appear as properties Dalits still need to acquire, by getting rid of established dispositions to be shy and deferential. There is also the sense that people speak different languages, even when all speaking the Nepali language, and that Dalits need to find ways to translate their knowledge and objectives. Hence, while "education is our biggest asset; we do not have anything else" (as one person expressed it), this asset still comes along with considerable uncertainty.

Choosing the Right Path of Action, Embracing Large-scale Social Goals; But how to make Dalits Heard, Supported, and Effective?

The production of knowledge on the situation of Dalits in contemporary Nepal is closely interwoven with discussions of the proper path of political action. The questions what and who are the causes of Dalit subordination, oppression, and exclusion neatly corresponds with the quest to design modes of action, such as forming political opposition and finding political allies. While it would be easy and appropriate to argue that most Dalit problems are related to values, norms, and practices of the 'societal mainstream' oriented towards elite practices, many Dalit activists are reluctant to depict the high-caste establishment as their political opponents and one of the main sources of their problems. Seeing clearly their own

political powerlessness, deriving from the lacking access to key societal positions and from numerical weakness (with officially only a 13 per cent share of the population), many Dalit activists position themselves as part and parcel of Nepalese society, claiming that untouchability is a national problem to be tackled jointly. This strategy is promising in as much as the ideology of 'social inclusion' and the quest for social rights is a high priority of political discourse at the national level. In this vein, the claims of gender activists, Janajatis (i.e. ethnic activists claiming the right of 'first comers', of indigeneity), as well as Madhesi activists, match those of Dalits and are accepted as legitimate in civil society and in government rhetoric. This strategy is also promising because more and more members of the so-called high castes engage in movements fighting Dalit discrimination and act accordingly in the private realm. At the same time, aligning with the 'societal mainstream' is risky because in this course of action the Dalit struggle is likely to lose the 'constitutive other' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) that would buttress adversary politics, allowing for a more pronounced and demanding assertion. Changing the underpinnings of a society (including large portions of the ethnic population and even Dalits themselves) so deeply shaped by Hindu hierarchy will require a very long campaign.

Against the backdrop of ideological uncertainties, the lack of Dalit unity bears hard upon young Dalit activists. The internal caste hierarchy, fragmented political allegiances, 'internal' social distances, and internal disputes (e.g. with regards to religious conversion and how to understand 'inclusive Hinduism'), all these force young Dalits to face serious dilemmas with no obvious single answer. Many young Dalits expressed their doubts and even self-critique concerning the modalities of Dalit collective action. There is a felt discrepancy between enjoying rights and the possibilities of realizing them: On the one hand, citizenship and the universalistic human rights discourse are enabling and inspiring for Dalits.[12] On the other hand, the lack of an agreed agenda on how to struggle for Dalit rights, given the significant disparities in contemporary Nepal, renders the citizenship discourse complex and demanding. Furthermore, important collective projects meet with fierce opposition. Dalit activism was boosted by anti-racism campaigns surrounding the 2001 Durban Conference, while facing rejection by forces aligning with the Indian Government that strongly opposed the equation of 'untouchability' with racism. Dalit activists' attempts to make common cause with other 'excluded groups' (women, Janajatis, and Madhesis, in particular) are not always fully reciprocated. Besides, Dalit activists are also significantly more outspoken on the intersectional character of their grievances, while the issue of class does not as often enter other activists' discourses. While Dalit activism is particularly subtle, highlighting the different

dimensions of inequality and discrimination, such a differentiated approach may have the effect of blunting the political edge of Dalit struggle in the public sphere.

Many Dalits' reluctance to be organized on the basis of a caste identity that still denotes pronounced dimensions of low status, oppression, and powerlessness undermines Dalit attempts to construct a collective identity that would buttress activism.[13] Political doubts with regards to collective action are matched by individual doubts regarding the selected personal life courses. While many young Dalits convey a modest sense of pride in their achievements (nobody ever boasted), self-introspection and self-questioning were frequent. 'Am I/are we on the proper track?' was a query often alluded to and even explicitly pronounced. At the personal level, the politics of the self—i.e. the more or less self-conscious shaping of personal positioning—are lacking role models and (hence) the knowledge of what to become and how to reach there. The individual pathways need to be invented and require a lot of experimenting. Young Dalits, and especially young Dalit female professionals, perennially push onto new grounds, 'migrating' into new social spaces previously closed to them. All interviewees stressed the importance of engaging in political action for the sake of collective Dalit well-being. They voiced a critique of those Dalits who hide their identity and pursue their individual projects of a 'good life', but some also narrated problems in mediating between individual well-being and collective engagement. While both dimensions clearly overlap in many respects, the tensions in time allocation (e.g. 'family time' vs. activist engagement) and the use of personal resources for the sake of common good—with the quest to 'give back' being high on the agenda—was a recurring question.

Yet another field of uncertainties emerges in the discrepancy between 'reservation' and 'merit' (cf. Sunam & Shrestha, this volume). Sagar narrated the following story: when he was appointed in an UN-sponsored INGO in rural Nepal he initially rejected any form of preferential treatment for his caste fellows. Only after more than a year working in the field, did he realize the full scope of the disadvantages that Dalits faced in the rural areas where he was based, so that he eventually turned to the 'preferential treatment' options available. Most Dalits fully embrace, accept, and welcome the newly introduced reservations for Dalits in the public sector, but the way they speak about it is often defensive or apologetic. The resentment of 'upper-caste' Nepalis vis-à-vis these regulations is strongly felt so that conversations are often shaped by the expected critique. The notion of 'merit' pops up in conversation time and again and has particularly positive connotations. Most young Dalits want 'merit' to shape their life-course and they want to acquire social positions on their own merit and not through reservations. Having achieved so much

by deploying individual effort and intelligence, this claim is fully understandable. But knowing how much economic, social, and cultural capital educated elites have at their disposal throughout their life-course, one cannot help thinking that many young Dalits possibly put too much pressure upon themselves. 'Merit' is an ideological term. Recent research on inequalities in the education sector reveals the scope of disparities between students with different capital endowments. Meritocracy talk (Solga 2015) covers up the layers of personal abilities acquired in middle-class and elite families in the course of growing up that appear as 'merit' vis-à-vis those scoring worse at schools and universities, but being based at differential life-chances coming with social background. It is a paradox that the young Dalits confer so much value on 'merit' that puts them at disadvantage, given their own restricted capital endowment. The quest to achieve everything on your own and even help others puts yet another burden on Dalits, 'grounding' them even more.

The strong value stress on resilience and on 'merit' is likely to dilute the Dalits' anger that would buttress their political action. This state of affairs is supported by the great reluctance to be emotional and to be outspoken about the many adversary personal experiences that they have been through. On numerous occasions when recounting their past experiences interviewees tended to play down the scope of suffering they endured in their personal trajectories. This shows in such statements as "I was a bit discriminated"; "it was not too terrible at school"; "I understood that they did not want me to enter their house". On several occasions young Dalits explicitly stated that they did not want to become too emotional. 'Being rational' is considered a value that is seemingly standing at odds with being emotional (in fact, both are intertwined). Accounting past suffering, distress, or a sense of alienation appears to be inappropriate. Arguably, not wanting to remember the experienced past wrongs and opting against emotional expression can help in shaping a personal positioning translating into social mobility or activist modes of action. But not allowing for emotional expression is a delicate act, possibly all the more causing personal distress. Arjun mentioned yet another dimension of this theme: he is reluctant to raise Dalit topics while talking to his colleagues within the faculty. Bringing Dalit topics up would result in being taken for a Dalit—which he is trying to avoid in his everyday encounters, while not hiding his identity. The question is then how to formulate Dalit objectives and how to voice social critique stemming from Dalit experience when one is reluctant to depict oneself as subjected to discriminatory practices.

Concluding Remarks: Open Questions

While individual Dalit academicians have undoubtedly created a small revolution in their own life course, looking back at their highly impressive struggles to enter spaces formerly closed to them, they often express the sentiment that it still wasn't enough. Their individual and collective upward mobility has to be weighed in the balance against the social positions and resources of the 'mainstream' of the Nepalese society. "Are we really going to make it?" asked Milan, one of the interviewees, highlighting the long tradition of learning among members of other caste groups. Rakesh, another one said simply: "They can walk and I have to run." The distribution of resources remains uneven. The social openings provided by the notion of social inclusion and the new opportunities such as activism forums, occupations, rights and regulations, buttressed by this formula are countered by the simple fact that social power is limited and the newcomers' aspirations contested. The pace of change is unevenly distributed in Nepal; Dalits are not only newcomers, but also seen by numerous members of the establishment as 'transgressors', 'gatecrashers', 'interlopers'.

The upwardly mobile are confronted with multiple challenges of belonging. Rakesh expressed what he saw as a big problem (that seems not be shared by all the others, but is nevertheless indicative): "Education is making me an outcaste from my own community." This self-perception mirrors dilemmas faced by 'social climbers' lifted out of their own class through education all around the world. At the same time, entering new social fields may be impeded by the sense of not belonging. Therefore, Dalit academicians experience tensions brought about by their aspirations to acquire multiple belonging (in the field of education, in professional fields, in political and social activism, in family life) while facing social barriers in many of the social fields to which they sought entry, or that they partly exited. There is a strong sense of a common Dalit lot, but it is accompanied by the accentuated social and political divisions rather precluding the sense of commonality and mutuality. Also, the many insecurities and uncertainties impinge upon the sense of future possibilities. And yet, one thing seems to be certain: the individual pathways of young Dalits are all important contributions to enhancing collective well-being. Acquiring knowledge, reaching new social spaces, and acting as role models are crucial ingredients in carrying on the on-going Dalit struggle in Nepal.

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Notes

[1] I use the term 'academician' in the sense of occupations requiring academic credentials, in other words, not merely teaching professionals but also civil servants, development professionals, journalists, and so on.

[2] See, for instance, COCAP's nationwide collective campaign for the elimination of caste-based discrimination and untouchability carried out in 2012 (www.cocap.org.np).

[3] SLC = School Leaving Certificate, i.e. the degree acquired after the first 10 years of school education.

[4] All personal names are pseudonyms chosen by JPC.

[5] But students can also fail while enjoing financial support.

[6] She recalls her father telling her that during his school days he was addressed by the least honorific 'ta'. When teachers wanted to punish Dalit pupils, not wanting to touch them, they used to throw sticks at their head.

[7] I thank Éva Hölzle for sharing her ideas with me and for her suggestions.

[8] I remember a situation around the year 2008 when, upon my question about Dalit culture, a Dalit activist answered: "We Dalits, we don't have culture". When we met two years later, he told me that he had been mistaken on this issue.

[9] But not only Dalit students have experienced going hungry during their education.

[10] A trend also observed among non-Dalits of non-academic background.

[11] So far, I have not been able to trace any female Dalit university teacher.

[12] Not surprisingly, citizenship is a big issue for Dalits (see especially Biswakarma 2018).

[13] By contrast, the ethnic activists dispose of rich repertoires of normative inversions (Wimmer 2013: 57) vis-à-vis the high-caste establishment, such as past bravery, solidarity, and an egalitarian spirit (see Bista 1991; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2005).

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