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Dalit identity in urban Pokhara, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Urban migration by Nepalese Dalits has not only provided them with social, economic and educational opportunities, but also the possibility of escaping traditional caste-based discrimination. However, despite making the most of opportunities provided by the city, Dalits have not been able to pursue their political agenda to the extent of other ethnic communities. This study in the city of Pokhara, Nepal, explored Dalit identity using two rounds of focus group discussions involving a total of 23 individuals drawn from a range of Dalit caste groups with a variety of livelihoods. The results describe the caste-based discrimination experienced by the participants and the different strategies they employ to either reinvent themselves by changing names; or embracing their caste-heritage and taking advantage of affirmative action programmes. Whilst urban migration can provide some relief from discrimination, the study reveals that caste still remains prominent in the lives of Dalits in Pokhara. The paper argues that Dalit unity and elimination of intra-Dalit caste-based discrimination are needed in order to institutionalise their citizenship rights in post conflict Nepal.

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1. Introduction

The promulgation of a much anticipated new constitution of Nepal in late 2015 partially ended a prolonged political transition, including the decade long Maoist insurgency. However, ethnicity remains a contentious area in both politics and economic action (Karki, 2010; Khanal et al., 2012; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013; Adhikari and Gellner, 2016). Recent political groups, such as the Unified Dalit, Terai and Tharu movements, which are organised by various ethnic and regional groups including Dalits, Madheshis (people living in the southern Terai region of Nepal bordering India) and an indigenous group (Tharus) respectively have their roots in the issue of ethnic identity and failure of political elites to address it adequately. Instead of rejoicing in the new constitution, Nepal suffered from further instability due to political rallies and politically motivated violence. Moreover, an informal economic blockade imposed by India in 2015 in response to Madheshi concerns in the constitution making process, placed a heavy fiscal burden on an already fragile economy recovering from a series of earthquakes earlier that year.

Although significant differences exist between political parties such as the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF), Rajendra Mahato-led Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP), Terai-Madhesh

Loktantrik Party (TMLP) and Adivasi Janajati (indigenous people), the issue of ethnic identity brought them together for the promotion and institutionalisation of their political, social, religious and cultural and economic rights (Hachhethu et al., 2008; Nayak, 2011; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013). However, despite representing about 13.1 per cent of the Nepalese population (CBS, 2011), Dalits have failed to unite and clearly articulate their political agenda. Dalits continue to remain one of the most economically marginalised, politically excluded and socio-culturally oppressed communities in Nepal (Dahal et al., 2002; Kabeer, 2006; UNDP, 2008; Sunar, 2008). Published statistics indicate that Dalits as a group are significantly below the national average in most development indicators such as poverty - 48%; literacy - 40%; chronic childhood malnutrition - 60%; food deficiency - 85%; and life expectancy - 48 years (CBS, 2011). Furthermore, the humiliating and degrading practice of untouchability is still continuing despite the country being declared 'untouchable free' by the new constitution (Bhattachan et al., 2009; Cameron, 1998, 2009; Lamsal, 2012). This social practice ascribes a low status to certain social groups confined to menial and despised jobs within the Hindu caste system (Berreman, 1973) and within which people from higher castes avoid direct physical contact with people from lower castes and do not share food and drink touched by them.

There are strong incentives to escape the constraints imposed by caste and it can be a factor in rural to urban migration. Similar to other developing countries, Nepal has significant migration from

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rural to urban areas (Chen et al., 1996; Chant, 1998; Rigg, 1998; Woods, 2012). People migrate primarily for new economic opportunities, as cities provide jobs (Castles and Miller, 2003; Bhattacharya, 2002; Ishtiaque and Ullah, 2013), but also for social benefits such as provision of education and health care (Kochar, 2004; Roberts, 2001; Banerjee, 1991). A third reason for migration is to escape discriminatory social structures prevalent in rural districts by seeking a new identity in the relative anonymity of cities (Adhikari and Deshingkar, 2015; Picherit, 2012; Cameron, 2007; Folmar, 2007). This is particularly relevant in the case of Dalits as the extent of caste-based discrimination in urban settings is less than in rural areas (Pandey et al., 2006). Therefore, the Dalit community in Nepal is a particularly interesting case to explore migration as a way of seeking new identities.

This paper draws on a study in a small city, Pokhara, which is about 210 km from the capital Kathmandu. It investigates the space it provides to Dalit communities for defining and redefining their ethnic and cultural identities, and the ways in which they renegotiate and realign their economic activities during the current political transition in Nepal. The paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 describes the notion of caste and provides a brief review of the role caste and ethnicity in the recent political processes in Nepal. Research methods and a brief introduction of Pokhara are presented in Section 3. Section 4 presents analysis and discussion; and conclusions are presented in Section 5.

2. Caste and politics

This study focuses on the diverse ethnic group of Dalits. Dalits in Nepal and elsewhere have endured social segregation, discrimination and oppression, including untouchability, at the hands of non-Dalits particularly the higher castes, Brahmins and Chhetri, despite following the same religion and having common deities. In the past, discrimination against Dalits was so endemic that they were not allowed to be educated, serve in the army, denied rights to property, had different footpaths and water wells, and were denied entry to temples (Ahuti, 2008). Ghimire (2010) argues that it was a common belief in the past that food and water touched by Dalits should not be consumed by non-Dalit girls when their teeth begin to grow and boys should do the same when they reach ritual performing age, which is usually at very early age. Dalits have also suffered discrimination and sub-ordination at the hands of Janajati (indigenous people). For example, a study by Hofer (1976) investigated the relationship between Bishwokarma or Kaami (Dalit

caste) and the Tamangs (Janajati caste) in Chautara in Sindhupalchowk district and showed that, despite following Buddhism, Dalits suffered caste-based discrimination by the Tamangs. However, even though discrimination occurs at the level of individuals, boundaries between the castes are not clear (Mayer, 1960) and this obscures political identity.

Caste consists of social categories that are exclusive (no one belongs to more than one group) and exhaustive (everyone belongs to some group), a stratification that is still prevalent in Hindu societies all over the world where individuals inherit caste from their parents at birth (Bailey, 1963). One of the principles on which the caste system is based is the “Hindu Pollution Concept” (Hutton, 1946; Srinivas, 1952; Douglas, 2002; Dumont, 1970). These divide society into four Varnas namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Sudras. The Varna system has roots in the Dharmastrasas (a collection of ancient Hindu religious books prescribing moral laws and religious duties and righteous). Sudras include a wide spectrum of groups, including near-untouchables. The tasks assigned to the Dalits are considered to be too ritually polluting to merit inclusion within the traditional Varna system and so the Dalits experience social exclusion.

The ritual status is derived from the relationships of individuals within a group or between groups, with respect to a pattern of interactions based on religious myths, particularly interpretation of the Rig Vedas (one of the four canonical sacred texts of Hinduism), which divides the Hindus into good sacredness and bad sacredness (Srinivas, 1952; Milner, 1994). In the 14th century, King Jayasthiti Malla stratified the society he was ruling in Kathmandu into various castes and sub castes based on the ancient system of Hindu Philosophy (Riccardi, 1977). The idea of reincarnation is inherent in Hinduism. As such, Hindus believe that good sacredness is a reward for people from the god who conducted themselves well and performed good deeds (Karma) in their previous life and bad sacredness is a punishment given to those who failed to conduct themselves well. It is believed that being high caste is a reward associated with good sacredness whilst low caste is associated with bad sacredness (Srinivas, 1952). The Muluki Ain (Legal Code) of 1854, implemented by Jung Bahadur Rana, formally legalised the caste system by dividing Nepali society into a four-fold caste hierarchy as shown in Table 1.

From a broader sociological viewpoint an equivalence can be made between Adivasi-Janajati and other caste groups prevalent in Nepal, including Madheshis, Brahmins, Adivasi Janajati, Dalits and so on, as recognisable ethnic groups. However, in practice,

Table 1
Caste hierarchy proposed by the Muluki Ain (legal code) 1854 in Nepal. Source: Höfer (1979).

Caste group of the “Wearers of the holy cord” (<i>tāgādhārī</i>)	Caste group of the “Non-enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers” (<i>namāsinyā matwālī</i>)	Caste group of the “Enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers” (<i>māsinyā matwālī</i>)	Impure, but “touchable” castes (<i>pāni nacalnā choi chiṭo hā lnunaparnyā</i>)	Untouchable castes (<i>pāni nacalnā choi chiṭo hā lnunaparnyā</i>)
Upādhyaya Brāhman	Magar	Bhoṭe (“Tibetanids” and some “Tibetanoids”)	Kasāi (Newār butchers)	Kāmi (blacksmiths)
Rajput (Thakuri) (“warrior”)	Gurung	Cepāng	Kusle (Newār musicians)	Sārki (tanners, shoemakers)
Jaisi Brāhman	Sunuwār	Kumāl (potters)	Hindu Dhobi (Newār washerman)	Kaḍārā (stemming from unions between Kāmi and Sārki)
Chetri (Kṣatri) (“warrior”)	Some other Newār castes	Hāyu	Kulu (Newār tanners)	Damāi (tailors and musicians)
Dew Bhāju (Newār Brahmins)		Thāru	Musulmān	Gāine (minstrels)
Indian Brahmin		Gharti (descendants of freed slaves)	Mlecch (European)	Bādi (musicians)
Ascetic sects (Sannyāsi, etc.)				Pore (Newār skimmers and fisherman)
“Lower” Jaisi				Cyāme (Newār scavengers)
Various other Newār castes				

some groups, such as the Adivasi-Janajatis are considered to be 'indigenous' groups in Nepal, whilst Dalits do not have an ethnic group status. This is mainly because Dalits do not share a distinct race, language, culture or territory. They are culturally heterogeneous and sparsely distributed throughout Nepal (Gellner, 2007; Folmar, 2013). The National Dalit Commission of Nepal identified 22 separate cultural groups within the Dalits in 2003 (Bhattachan et al., 2009). In 2011 the number was increased to a total of 29 cultural groups within Dalits (Biswokarma, 2011).

The situation is further confused in Nepal by caste and ethnicity having been used interchangeably (Hutt, 1997; Allen, 1997), mainly because of lack of clarity amongst academics and policy makers alike (Gray, 2012). The distinction between caste and ethnicity is unclear in many spheres including government documents such as the census (CBS, 2002); the Constituent Assembly's State Restructuring Committee (GoN, 2011); reports by international organisations (Bennett et al., 2008; Ghai and Cottrell, 2008; Sharma and Sen, 2008); and academics (Bennett, 2005; Bhatt and Mansoob, 2009; Gellner, 2005; Khanal, 2009). However, the distinction between caste and ethnicity is important, as conflation of the two is considered a major obstacle to engaging Dalit agendas in the political arena (Folmar, 2013). Of the many sociological differences between caste and ethnicity, three in particular remain critical for Dalits. Firstly, people of different ethnic background remain more or less socially equal despite differences in culture, traditions and class status. For example, Magars, Gurungs and some Newars castes are all socially equal on the caste hierarchy even though there are cultural differences between them. However, despite sharing many cultural/traditional attributes, Dalits are vertically differentiated on the caste hierarchy with intra-Dalit discrimination being rampant. Secondly, caste hierarchy not only enabled, but also legitimised, economic exploitation and political marginalisation of Dalits. In contrast, ethnic groups did not demonstrate economic exploitation, mainly because of similar social status (Gray, 2012). Thirdly, some ethnic groups in Nepal are clustered in certain geographical areas such as Newars in the

Kathmandu valley, Tharus in the west, Rais/Limbu in the east, and Gurungs/Magars in the Gandaki valley. However, Dalits are not concentrated in any single geographic area, but live throughout the country as shown in Fig. 1. As such, in this paper Dalits are considered as caste groups, located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, that are more or less horizontally and culturally homogenous (in terms of the discrimination endured), but vertically hierarchized (in terms of existence of intra-Dalit caste hierarchy).

The long tradition of caste-based stratification in society has been a major contributory factor in recent civil unrest and political division (Sharma, 2006; Sambanis, 2001; Hironaka, 2005). Castes have become competing socio-political groups with a hegemony of upper castes controlling state. Governance, consolidating political and bureaucratic power, and so further embedding the socio-economic hierarchy (Ishii et al., 2007). This resulted in discrimination contributing to the onset of a brutal civil war in Nepal (Murshed and Gates, 2005; Do and Iyer, 2010), leading to political fragility (Rotberg, 2003) to the extent that Nepal was often spoken of as a failed state (Manjikian, 2008). Dalits were closely involved with this so-called 'Maoist People's War', waged by the Maoist Communist Party against the state in Nepal between 1996 and 2006, in their struggle for political identity (Bownas, 2015). The Maoist insurgency affected the countryside as the insurgency was particularly severe in rural areas and had considerable support from many socio-economically and politically disadvantaged sections of the Nepalese society, including Dalits, Adivasi and Janajati (indigenous people) particularly from rural communities, who suffered historic and institutionalised social discrimination, political exclusion and economic deprivation (Adhikari, 2014; Kalyvas, 2006; Lawoti and Pahari, 2010; Macours, 2010).

At the end of the conflict, two rounds of elections to the Constitutional Assembly and deliberations on state restructuring brought the issue of ethnic identity to the forefront of political debates (Karki, 2010; Khanal et al., 2012; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013). Formation of a Constitutional Assembly through election to write a

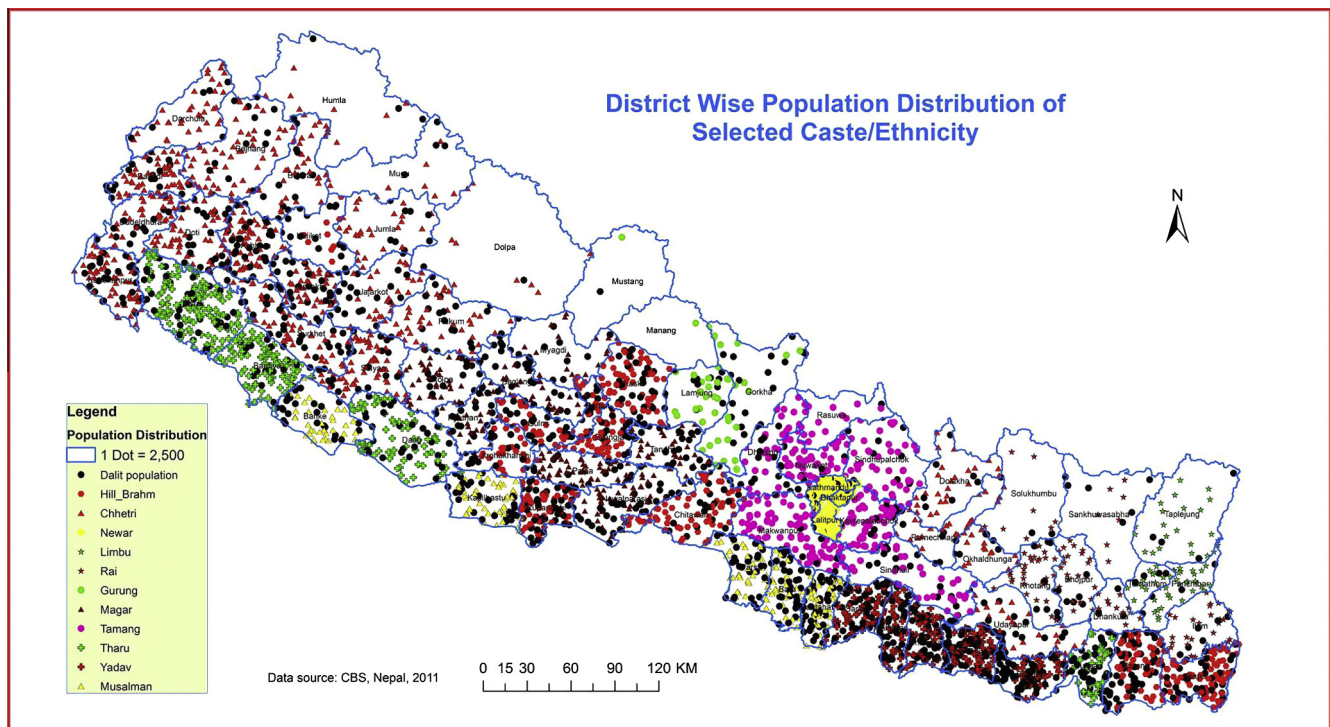


Fig. 1. Major castes and ethnic distribution in Nepal 2011.

new constitution by people's representatives was one of the key demands of the Maoists. As a part of the peace building process, Nepal held its first Constitution Assembly election in April 2008, but this was dissolved in May 2012 without promulgating a constitution. Ethnicity was a key factor preventing agreement on this Constitutional Assembly-I. Nepal again held a second Constitutional Assembly in November 2013 and ethnicity continues to be a major issue in discussions for the Constitutional Assembly-II. Such delays are caused not only by the polity, but also the complex and heterogeneous composition of Nepalese Dalits, where the social category of Dalits in Nepal is multi-layered with divisions along the lines of religion, caste (within caste), region, class position and situation, gender, age and language (B.K., 2007; Dahal et al., 2002; Kharel, 2010). As such, whilst the assumption is that there are common foundations of social categorization and identification (Turner, 1985), both similarities and differences have featured in the construction of Dalit identity in Nepal (Buckingham, 2008; Jans et al., 2012). The field study conducted in Pokhara reported here explores aspects of this identity in an urban setting.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Study site

Present day Pokhara city covers 55.22 sq. km, of which 4.4 sq. km is water in rivers and lakes (CBS, 2011). The population grew from 13,000 in 1956 to 20,611 in 1971 and 36,010 in 1978 (Tadié, 2010). More recent rapid expansion has led to the population reaching 300,000 in 2011 (CBS, 2011). The modern city has emerged as a rapidly urbanising commercial hub known as the "tourism capital of Nepal" (Nepal et al., 2002). The city serves as the base for world famous Annapurna Circuit trek and hundreds of thousands of tourists visit Pokhara for pilgrimage and adventure tourism. The service sector, including tourism and hospitality industries, contribute 58% of Pokhara's economy, with remittances contributing 20% and agriculture 16% (Baniya, 2004). The increase in population has been fuelled by an influx of internal migrants from neighbouring towns and villages, particularly during the Maoist insurgency. Pokhara has become a cultural confluence of more than 80 different ethnic and caste groups (Adhikari, 2000). The major castes living in Pokhara are Brahmins, Chhetris, Gurungs, Magars and Dalits, mainly following Buddhist and Hindu religions. A small proportion of Muslims also live in the city.

Historically, whilst settlement of the surrounding mountain forests of Pokhara by Tibetan-Burmese tribes (Gurung and Magar) took place as early as the 8th and 9th century, it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the town of Pokhara started with the migration of 26 Newar households from Bhaktapur (Kathmandu valley). The Gurungs and Magars practiced animal husbandry and swidden agriculture, whereas the Newars residing in the valley practiced agriculture, trade and crafting (Kafle, 2011) and were attracted by the fertile agricultural land, water facilities for irrigation and forests for wood, food and fodder (Adhikari, 2000). Impressed by their trading abilities and artisanship, the King of Kaski Kingdom facilitated westward migration of more Newars from Kathmandu to Pokhara (see Fig. 2).

As the kingdom gained strength Pokhara became a military centre on an established postal route called "Hulaki Marga" (Blaike et al., 1980, p. 124). Historians such as Regmi (1971) mentioned that Pokhara developed as an important trading centre because of its location as a gateway to Thak Khola where Thakali (an important ethnic tribe of Tibetan origin) lived. The Thakalis travelled to Pokhara to trade salt, spices and herbs. Hill ethnic groups such as Gurungs and Magars, whose primary occupation was sheep rearing, traded woollen blankets, honey, wax, ghee and oilseeds to

Tibet via Thak Khola in the north and to India via Butwal (Batauli) in the south. The traders also brought sugar, tea, spices, medicine and cotton clothes from India via Butwal to Pokhara. Pokhara was designated the administrative headquarters of district west No. 3 during the Rana regime, which contributed towards Pokhara flourishing as a market place and administrative hub (Adhikari, 2002).

Although Pokhara was considered a place of importance for trade and commerce, it was not until the political changes brought by the fall of the autocratic Rana regime, and introduction of democracy in 1951, that the development process accelerated. In fact, Pokhara was not even mentioned as an urban centre in the 1952–54 census (Adhikari, 2000). The airport was built in 1958 and the first motor vehicle ran in the city only the following year.

The city gained municipality status in 1959 and was upgraded to Town Panchayat in 1965, providing impetus for development of transport, communication and economic activities. The Indian government set up the Military Pension Branch of the Embassy of India in 1996, for the payment of pension and address other welfare issues of the Nepalese ex-servicemen and their families residing in Nepal. This further, attracted in-migrants to Pokhara from other parts of the country. Hydro-power generation by the Phewa dam provided electricity for the first time in Pokhara. Much of the population increase and urbanisation took place when Pokhara was connected to Kathmandu by road after completion of the Prithvi Highway in 1974; and with India via Sunauli when the Sidhartha Highway was completed in 1972. Pokhara was designated as the Headquarters of Western Development Region in 1972 and the city was declared a Sub Metropolitan city in 1996.

3.2. Research methods

Two focus group discussions were held in March 2014. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants living and working in Pokhara. Three eligibility criteria were used for recruiting participants, these were: Dalit castes; age at least 18 years; and residency, living in Pokhara either temporarily or permanently. Table 2 presents characteristics of the participants.

Altogether 13 participants representing various Dalit castes took part in the first round of focus group discussion, of whom nine were male and four were female. The age range of the participants was 19–57. Five participants belonged to the Pariyar (Damai) caste with livelihoods being: tailoring business; tailoring; bank worker; housewife and a local journalist. Some of the participants belonging to the Pariyar caste, who were financially well off, had set up tailoring businesses, whilst those who did not have the financial capability worked as custom sewers in tailoring shops. Three participants were Bishwokarma (Kaami) of whom one worked as a goldsmith whilst the other two were a local politician and a housewife. Two participants belonged to Nepali (Sarki), one was a student and the other worked as a cobbler in Pokhara. Dalit castes such as Pariyar, Bishwokarma, Nepali and Gandharva are called also Damai, Kaami, Sarki and Gaine respectively although the use of such terms is not preferred by Dalit castes mainly due to stigma attached with them. Two participants belonged to the Gandharva (Gaine) caste of whom one was a housewife whilst the other worked as a street singer who sang on local public buses. Only three individuals were living permanently in Pokhara, whilst the remaining ten were temporary residents as they did not own a property in Pokhara were there only for work. The temporary residents visited their families in their home towns or villages once every few months especially during festivals and holidays.

The second round of focus group discussions took place in the Dalit settlement where ten participants from Dalit castes took part, ranging in age from 25 to 53. Seven of the participants were male whilst the remaining three were female. The females belonged to

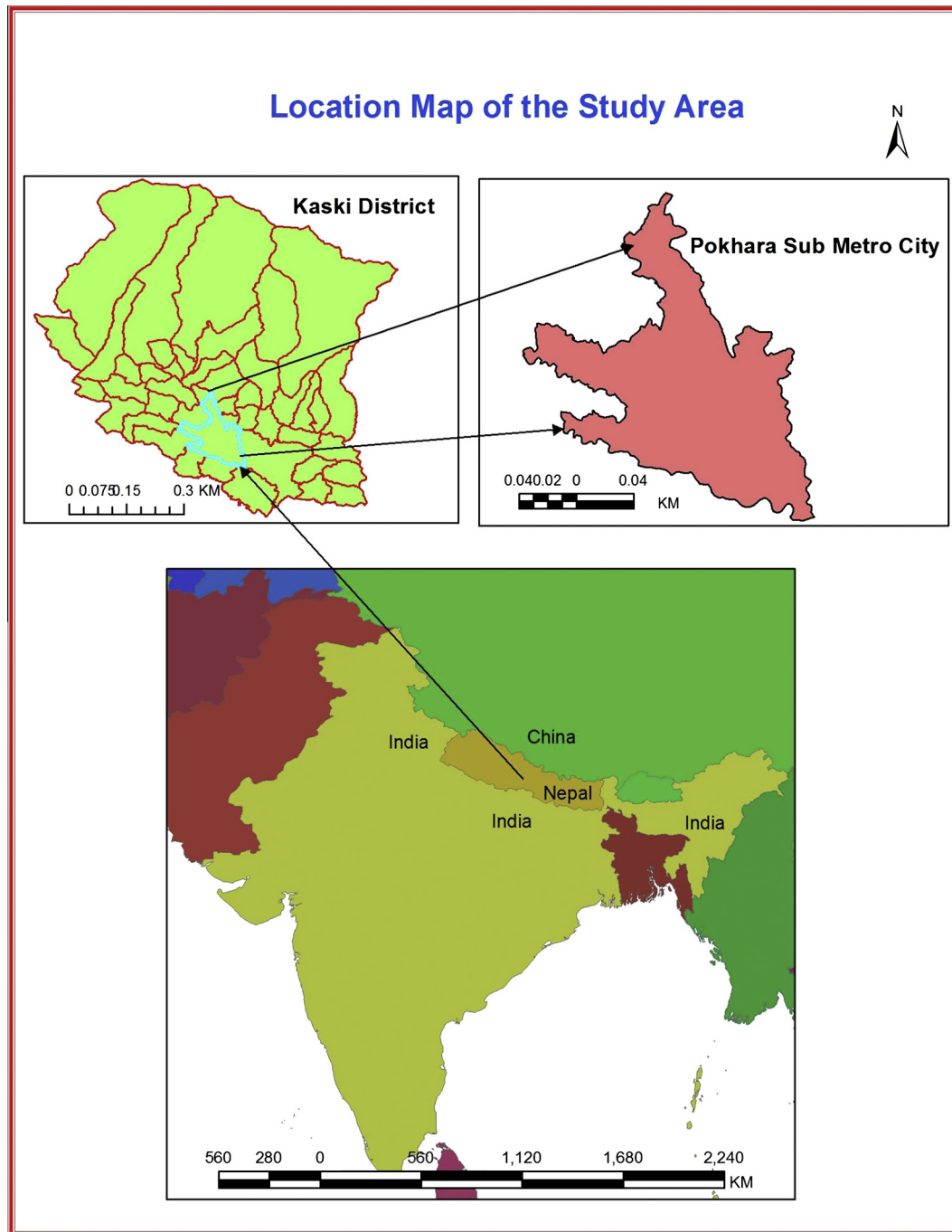


Fig. 2. Map of study site.

the Nepali, Pariyar and Bishwokarma castes, of which two were housewives and one ran a local *kirana pasal* (corner shop). Of the seven males, two were Pariyars who worked as tailors in the city, whilst two Bishwokarma worked as wage labourers. One of the Gandharva had a business selling Sarangi (musical instruments), whilst one Nepali was unemployed seeking foreign employment in the Middle East, and another was a housewife. Five participants were permanent residents of Pokhara whilst the remaining five were temporary residents. The higher proportion of participants who were permanent residents of Pokhara in the second round of focus group discussion is mainly due to location, as the focus group discussion took place in the Dalit settlement areas.

Participants whose castes were Poda and Chyame spoke both Nepali and ethnic Newari languages, whilst the others spoke only Nepali.

Unlike previous studies of Dalits in Pokhara (Bishwokarma, 2004; Parajuli, 2007; Chhetri, 2007), this research included a broad mix of participants from different Dalit caste groups representing individuals from various walks of life, including both temporary and permanent residents. The rationale for including a mix of participants is due to the need to have a range of views given the nature of the research question, which included concepts of urban citizenship, political transition and state restructuring. These are contested topics, as all ethnic groups were making claims to ensure

Table 2
Characteristics of focus group participants.

Characteristics	Focus group discussion I (N)	Focus group discussion II (N)
<i>Castes</i>		
Pariyar	5	2
Bishwakarma	3	3
Nepali	2	2
Gandharva	2	2
Chyame	1	0
Pode	0	1
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	9	7
Female	4	3
<i>Residency</i>		
Permanent	3	5
Temporary	9	5
Total	13	10

their rights were represented in the new constitution and be compensated in some way for the historical disadvantages they suffered. The mix of participants also enabled a rich and in-depth understanding of the issues through exploration of Dalit experiences of living and working in Pokhara city and how urban socio-economic factors have impacted their lives and livelihoods (Krueger, 1988).

Focus groups are well suited to obtaining rich contextual data, as they help to identify subjects' concerns and stimulate fresh ideas pertinent to research issues through debate and discussions, particularly when little is known at the outset (Hakim, 2000). The focus group discussion was also an efficient means of determining the language people used when thinking and talking about their life experience as Dalits in the city and the prevailing social and institutional settings that constrained their social-economic mobility (Krippendorff, 2004). This helped to provide concentrated amounts of data in the participants' own words. The participants' interactions added richness to the data that might be missed in individual interviews or surveys and, more importantly, provided critical information for appreciating the social and cultural intricacies of the Dalit community. Focus Group Discussions also provided an opportunity for the researchers to interact directly with participants, facilitating discussions, probing responses, posing follow up questions and clarifying any dubious and contentious issues (Stewart et al., 2007; Foddy, 1993). Articulating opinions and presenting their arguments on important aspects such as state restructuring, citizenship and constitution making can be difficult for illiterate Dalits. The focus group method helped to avoid answers such as "I do not know what to say". The rationale for choosing focus group discussions was also based on the necessity to stimulate research participants to build a clearer picture of the political and social fabric within which the notion of citizenship was visualised, claimed and contested.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Religion and culture in identity construction

Culturally, Dalits, with an exception of Newari Dalits, share almost identical features with other Hindu in Nepal. The cultural similarities are partly because both Dalits and non-Dalit follow the Hindu religion and believe in common deities and reincarnation; and are believed to have descended from either Astric and Dravidians or Indo-Aryans who arrived in Nepal either from India or the Caucasus region in central Asia. The focus group participants argued that "we are the same" as Brahmins and Chhetri, "we have the same gods and goddess", "we visit the same temples" and "we have common festivals".

"...We worship the same Krishna bhagwan (Lord Krishna) in the morning, dance to the same music in the afternoon and visit the same temple in the evening and it's Krishna Ashtami for everybody and the same goes for big festivals such as Dashain/Dashara and Tihar (Diwali)..."
[Female, 42 years]

Sapkota (2014) contends that racial identity emanates primarily from features that are external and visible such as skin colour e.g. white and non-white identity, and structure of the face e.g. Aryans and Mongol. Although much has changed, historically Europeans in general, and the British in particular, constructed a black ethnic group included those who were 'non-white' such as Asians, Africans and those of Caribbean descent (Yuen, 1997). However, whilst Dalits are treated like a different race from Aryans, they demonstrate mixed facial features and many of them share a similar biological and racial background with the higher castes of Brahmin and Chhetri making them almost indistinguishable, except for caste.

Another woman, who participated in the research said:

"...As the lady said earlier that we are the same and believe me, we are the same but the only difference is that we do everything as low caste Dalits, who are poor and they do it as higher caste Brahmins/Chhetri who are richer than us..."
[Female, 19 years]

The differences are socially constructed with religious backing, and this combination is translated into political and economic disparities. As political awareness has increased amongst the Dalits, the experience of such disparities has played an important role in the construction of Dalit identity.

4.2. Social shared experience in identity construction

Dalits in Nepal, as elsewhere, particularly in the Indian sub-continent, experience social segregation and untouchability. This was also true amongst the participants involved in this research. This discrimination also leads to a shared cultural and social background, which is considered fundamental in the construction and expansion of ethnic identity (Huntington, 1996).

Caste-based discrimination experienced by the participants in their home villages initially, and continued experience of discrimination, although different and to a lesser degree in Pokhara city, resonated profoundly in the construction of identity amongst the participants (Turner, 1985). During the focus group discussion, a participant, who had to sell his land in a rural village in Syangja district and migrated to Pokhara to overcome caste-based discrimination, burst into tears and shared his experience:

"...We were discriminated against everywhere – hotels, restaurants, schools, temples, local well, meat shop, dairy ... you name it...even in areas for open defecation ... we were not allowed to defecate in areas where higher caste visited to attend the nature's call..."
[Male, 42 years]

Feelings of psychological trauma due to caste-based discrimination in their home villages was a recurring theme amongst the participants:

"...It's extremely hard to survive in a murdered dignity, at times it kills me from within...its unbearable...the sound of very word Dalit hurts me..., its uncomfortable to talk, interact with friends, and neighbours because you never know when the humiliation is coming...we talk together, breathe together but I don't know what to say ... at least this is less of a problem in urban places like Pokhara although caste-based discrimination is not uncommon here too"
[Male, 42 years]

The relative advantage of living in an urban setting such as Pokhara was also echoed by another participant of the focus group discussion:

“...Because I was belittled and discriminated...my community could not become part of the mainstream and we were compelled to live as peripheral occupants...we have some degree of social integrations in the urban places like Pokhara...”

[Male, 36 years]

“...At school we could not touch the water container... there was a water pot full of water and mug too but I could not get water out I had to wait until the office assistant (peon) came so that he could give me some water from the pot...I used to get so thirsty sometimes for hours...”

[Female, 25 years]

There is a growing body of migration literature highlighting various reasons for migration of people from one location to another (Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro, 1969; Bilsborrow and DeLargy, 1990; Massey, 1999; Lall et al., 2006; Matarrita-Cascante and Stocks, 2013). Brettell and Hollifield (2000) and Priore (1979) argue that people migrate for economic reasons such as better employment opportunities, higher income and improved lifestyle. People also migrate from one place to another because of environmental concerns such as human induced and natural disasters (Smith, 2007; Naudé, 2008) and environmental change (Bates, 2002; Poston et al., 2009; Reuveny, 2007; Smith, 2007). Migration also is influenced by atrocities such as war, torture and violence (Boyle, 2014; Stokholm, 2015); and family and social reasons such as marriage and relationships (Hayes and Al-Hamad, 1995; Harbison, 1981; Fleischer, 2007). The major reasons cited by the focus groups for Dalits to migrate to cities such as Pokhara from towns and villages were: better economic opportunity, improved security, better educational opportunities for themselves and children and to avoid caste-based discrimination. The prospect for commercialising traditional occupations such as tailoring, being a minstrel, making utensils and jewellery was a pull factor contributing the reasons for migrating from rural villages to Pokhara city.

4.3. Shared economic experiences in identity construction

Historically, the traditional occupations such as tailor, musician, blacksmith, goldsmith, tillage/ploughing and minstrels were exclusively undertaken by Dalits under a *baali ghare pratha* (patron-client relationship) as *haruwa* and *charuwa* (bonded labour) in which they worked for higher caste landlords (zamindars) all year round, but were paid during festivals and harvest times mostly in kind, for example with grain. The Dalits were also remunerated in kind during festivals such as Dashain and Tihar (Diwali), mostly with meat and sweets. It was customary for Pariyar, Biswakarma and minstrels to visit higher caste houses for collecting their payments. Usually, Pariyars were offered tails and Bishwokarmas were given the neck of animals sacrificed in addition to food and sweets. The minstrels were paid in grain whilst other Dalit castes such as Nepali were not paid. A local proverb on some castes getting perks, whilst others received nothing, was used in the villages:

“...*Damai lai puchhar, kami lai kado, bichar sarki lai hudana khado...* (tailors get tails, blacksmiths get the necks, poor Sarki does not get anything but only non-remunerated work...)”

[Male, 57 years old]

Marxists, particularly those focusing on “economic determinism”, argue that similarities and differences in economic structures and mode of production forms the basis for the construction of social and political identity (McMurtry, 1973; Harvey, 2010). Whilst some obvious differences exist between class and caste

such as absence of caste-based discrimination, similar to class caste also has a material function in acquisition and legitimisation of power (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Nepalese political ideologists and leftist thinkers such as Ahuti (2008) argue that Dalits have historically been denied access to land, arms and education. A study on land acquisition by Dalits (Caplan, 1972) demonstrated that control of both economic and political power by higher castes prevented Dalit access to land. One of the participants of the focus group discussion, who migrated to Pokhara from Lamjung said:

“...We were cultivating this unproductive government land for decades, it could not be irrigated and was not registered in our names... we had small huts for our families... but those cunning Brahmins/Chhetris registered the land in the local school’s name and community forest, driving us away... They needed grazing land for their cattle whilst we lost our livelihoods...”

[Male, 32 years old]

As Caplan (1972) argues, whilst Dalits have suffered caste-based discrimination, exploitation and violence, and continue to face obstacles in attaining full civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, the changing relations between them and non-Dalits have meant that new economic and educational opportunities have arisen for Dalits, which is particularly relevant in the context of urban settings. As such, in addition to social empowerment, the Dalits interviewed are also striving to capitalise on the economic opportunities provided by the urban space compared to their native villages, where they struggled to commercialise their traditional occupations. As such, in addition to shared Dalit identity, participants also created new identities, such as in business and entrepreneurship. Many social theorists such as Tonkiss (2006) and Merrifield (2002) argue that urban spaces provide distinctive and unique opportunities for harnessing individual potential and defining and redefining both individual and collective identities. Many of the participants, who had suffered years of economic exploitation in the villages, expressed a sense of not just belongingness, but also a sense of gratitude towards the city for the economic space provided. As one participant said:

“...This city has given me a lot of things... It gave me my identity [as a businessman] and provided me with economic opportunity... The city helped realise my dreams... and bore fruit thanks to my hard work, dedication and work ethics...”

[Male 36 years old]

In addition to economic opportunities, cities such as Pokhara also provide educational opportunities especially for children. For example, one participant said:

“...Education of my children is everything for me and my family. My children attend a boarding school in Pokhara and I am really pleased with their studies. This would not have been possible if we had not migrated to Pokhara... their cousins are still in the village and not sure if they will pass their SLC as the teaching in Government schools in the village is so poor...”

[Female 35 years old]

The newly developed relationship between the urban space of Pokhara and increased opportunities is based on reciprocity with both economic and social mutual benefits. Pokhara city provides a new home away from home (village) to the migrant Dalits with a greater sense of confidence in themselves socially, economically and politically and lesser degree of caste-based discrimination, and in turn they contribute towards the city environment, culture, economy and commerce as one of the participants of focus group discussion said:

“...Pokhara is my new home... a new identity... I am making a living here and raising my family. I am a Pariyar and I do

tailoring and also play drum (damaha) in the band. . . Our band also plays during the festivals and special official functions in the sub-metropolitan council. . . many tourists come and watch us. . . we are preserving our nation's culture and traditions. . ."
[Male 42 years old]

The relationship of reciprocity between a city and its inhabitants in fostering a collective sense of belonging and outcomes has been discussed by [Herrmann and Thöni \(2009\)](#). A young entrepreneur, who had migrated to Pokhara from neighbouring Lamjung district, said:

" . . . Whilst it's true that this city (Pokhara) has provided me with opportunities, the city also benefitted from my contributions. . . because of the environment the city provided, I could provide my service to other city residents and visitors through my business. But definitely we need to look out for opportunities and create opportunities for ourselves and others, the city alone does not provide the environment. . . if you create opportunity for yourself, other things will take care of themselves. . ."
[Male, 37 years]

It is important to mention that many respondents, both illiterate and educated, considered that educational and entrepreneurial skills were a prerequisite to survive in urban areas, as these provided opportunities for employment and income. It was also observed that elderly people and women significantly lacked both education and entrepreneurial skills and were not only less active economically but also struggled to benefit from the economic opportunities such as setting up businesses and getting paid employment provided by the city. Many younger Dalits, despite being well educated and entrepreneurial, preferred not to engage in traditional occupations, even though these were in great demand. Whilst some Gandharva commercialised their traditional occupation by singing in restaurants and hotels, many Gandharvas have left their traditional occupation altogether. Instead they preferred to open grocery stores, petty shops, tea shops and vegetable shops. Some even worked as sweepers, taxi/tractor drivers and municipal police officers ([Parajuli, 2007](#)).

This shift was partly because of stereotypes attached to traditional occupations such as tailoring, blacksmiths and minstrels, despite existence of freedom and a real opportunity to make a decent living from these occupations. This is mainly because those occupations were historically associated with low castes, which lacked respect in society. As one of the younger participants said:

" . . . What is the point of going to college if I have to carry on my father's occupation. . ."
[Male, 20 years]

Participants, usually middle aged, who were either relatively well off in their native villages or had gained wealth in the city, were undertaking business ventures and commercialising their traditional occupations. For example by opening small scale businesses such as tailor shops, jewellery shops, shoe shops and music stores. It was also revealed by the participants that some occupations were more accommodating to women than others. For example, some women from Pariyar castes were engaging in tailoring, making ladies garments, whereas none of the women from Bishwokarma caste undertook work normally associated with blacksmiths, no women from Gandharva castes were street singers and women belonging to Nepali (Sarki) caste were not involved in their traditional occupations of repairing shoes.

Whilst cities and towns such as Pokhara have played a critical role in providing economic, educational and social-cultural opportunities, migrating to cities was also considered economically expensive and migrants often face difficulties in starting new businesses.

" . . . OK there is money in the city, but we do not have the bait . . . money attracts money. . . We are not rich people, we do not have land so banks will not provide us with loans to start businesses, and we just work in someone's tailoring shop despite our skills. . ."
[Male 35 years old]

4.4. Power relationships in identity construction

Historically, Dalits have been formative in laying the foundation for the democratic and ethnic movements, especially through urban centred political action in Nepal ([Bhattachan, 1998](#); [Lawoti, 2005](#)). In order to maintain status, the more powerful castes exercised non-competitive political rights. This was done by rarely relinquishing political power to lower castes; maintaining hegemony over resources of both governance (by controlling bureaucracy) and natural resources (by denying access to land, forests and water); and creating persistent structural inequalities. The ethnic groups, including Dalits, were systematically excluded and suffered institutional discrimination as they were denied civil, political and economic rights ([Lawoti, 2010](#)). As [Ahuti \(2008\)](#) argues "Dalits have been excluded from joining the military, owning property and attending school" and historically they were denied rights over their own wives; and relationships were not allowed with non-Dalit women ([Chakravarty, 1983, 1993](#)).

One of the participants recalled that it was particularly hard for him to attend school with Brahmins and Chhetri as firstly he was ridiculed for being at school; and secondly excluded from social functions, made to sit in a corner and bullied. His experience on one occasion changed his life for ever:

" . . . There was this Brahmin guy, who has gone onto become a high school teacher, bullied me all the time for coming to school. . . once he put some local tobacco leaves on my pocket and asked the Guru to check everybody's pocket. . . the physical pain I suffered from the beating by the Guru on discovering tobacco leaves on my pocket and emotional and psychological trauma from the derogatory phrases he used against me and Dalits generally still rings in my ears, I never smoked nor drank . . ."
[Male, 55 years old]

Because of lack of education and access to productive resources, such as land, Dalits often lived under economic hardship and depended on higher castes for survival. This formed the basis for their economic, social and political exploitation and discrimination. The contemporary Dalit movement seeks an end to all forms of caste-based discrimination, including untouchability, develop self-determination, ethnic and cultural identity and have proportional representation in the state apparatus both in national politics and bureaucracy. This agenda was also mentioned by the participants:

" . . . Whilst we have roles and responsibilities towards our country, we have been arguing for a respectable and proportional representation in affairs of state governance. . . we are not Dalit. . . we were made Dalit. . . I think history has shown we can contribute a lot to this country. . ."
[Male 42 years old]

Furthermore whilst the participants had varied political beliefs and party affiliations, they were in agreement that Dalits have played an important role in bringing about political transition in Nepal. They expressed a sense of pride in the Maoist movement for raising the voice of Dalits and ethnic minorities in Nepal. One participant said:

“...The Maoist movement definitely raised awareness amongst the Dalits and raised aspirations...it encouraged us to fight for our rights, search for our history and identity... on many occasions we were both the designers and implementer of warfare, taking leadership roles within the Maoist movement... the party gave us the chance and we performed... we just need to fight for our rightful place in the society and polity...”

[Male, 35 years old]

Kisan (2009) expressed similar sentiments: “the eradication of caste-based discrimination and untouchability will be addressed with proportionate representation and special/compensatory rights in every level and structure of the state, horizontal and vertical” (p.6). Given the fact that Nepal is undergoing unprecedented political transformation including restructuring of state governance, proportional political representation and implementation of affirmative policies, such as reservation in public sector employment, such claims are not unique to Dalit identity and movement. Indigenous Tharu communities (Sapkota, 2014), ethnic Janajati (Bhattachan, 2003) and the Terai-based Madhesi communities (Hachhethu, 2007) are also seeking fair representation and opportunity. As Gurung (1999) argues, “ethnic movements in Nepal are a natural outcome of age old suppression through the imposition of a stratified hierarchical model by the Hindu rulers of Nepal, which needs to be removed with a view to making the hitherto deprived ethnic groups equal partners in the development of a single territorial Nepalese nation-state” (p. 81). The participants indicated that a strong sense of collective identity and belonging has engendered national feelings, and is also justifying claims for the rightful place for Dalits in Nepal.

4.5. Challenges to Dalit identity

Despite residing in an urban location and being socially and economically better off compared to Dalits in many rural areas in Nepal identity formation amongst the Dalits of Pokhara takes place at multiple levels and scales. Also, despite suffering common caste-based discrimination like Dalits in other parts of Nepal, Dalits living in Pokhara are a heterogeneous group partly because of they do not necessarily share a distinct race, language, culture or territory and practice intra-Dalit caste-based discrimination. They officially belong to single social category and urban dwellers, but are divided by numerous characteristics including religion, caste, gender, language, region, rurality/urbanity and class position and professional sector (Dahal et al., 2002).

Whilst the state has a standard definition of Dalits as those who suffered social and cultural oppression, the word “Dalit” was perceived differently by different members of the Dalit community. Some members supported the use of the word, whilst others considered it to be patronising and derogatory and considered that it should not be used to indicate oppressed ethnic groups. Advocates of the use of Dalit firstly argue that the word Dalit is a symbol of pride of common heritage uniting different ethnic groups who have historically suffered oppression in Nepal. Secondly, they argue that the word can bring different oppressed groups under one umbrella, thereby creating unity in diversity. Opponents of the use of the word Dalit argue that whilst they appreciate the shared history of oppression and recognise the benefits of a united voice, the word Dalit is degrading and contributes to continuation and reinforcement of boundaries of oppression (Cameron, 2007). Some participants questioned the current understanding of Dalits and argued that if oppression is the main criteria, then other castes also fall within the definition of being Dalit, as oppression does not always follow caste lines. As one participant said:

“...Because the meaning of the word Dalit is individuals or groups that have been oppressed or suppressed and it can be anybody irrespective of castes, gender, income status, religion and regional location. If some people from so called high castes have suffered oppression or suppression socially or otherwise, they should also be within the Dalit category so that the word Dalit does not only imply people belonging to so called low castes...”

[Male, 32 years old]

Many participants agreed that the word Dalit is a political term, and has a political connotation attached, which has been used to fulfil political ambitions of some Dalit leaders and many non-Dalit leaders. Despite residing in a modern urban city such as Pokhara, the participants expressed a high degree of anxiety about the word Dalit increasingly getting institutionalised with long-term implications on their identity. As one participant said:

“...By labelling us Dalits, the state is subtly oppressing us as it symbolises that our status is always considered inferior. Dalit should not refer to an individual community...”

[Male 33 years old]

Another participant echoed similar sentiments:

“...By institutionalising the word Dalit, the state has tagged us in a way, where we always remain Dalits and oppressed. The oppressed might get opportunities but the shackle will always be there and will never go...it is still going to be a rubberstamp on our foreheads...”

[Female, 23 years old]

The interview data also indicated that there is a tension between individual identity and collective identity amongst the Dalits in Pokhara. Participants, particularly those who were more educated, increasingly questioned the very notion of caste as an identity per se. There was a clear conflict and tension between individual identity, as a professional citizen, and collective identity as a member of the Dalit community, particularly amongst those participants who were born and raised in the city and went to boarding school.

“...I think, the Dalits should not self-breed an inferiority complex and underestimate our own potentials and complain as one oppressed and discriminated group. The main thing is to get educated and learn from society/community and get organised to create our own identity, not as one that is oppressed, but one that is forward thinking and looking into the future...”

[Male 36 years old]

They argued that the notion of ethnicity amongst the Dalits is fluid and should not refer to a particular community as it fails to accommodate differences within the group. For example, Dalits follow different religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, and have differences in language, colour and experience of varying degrees of caste-based discrimination. Instead, caste is more psychological than social as it originates from a particular “state of mind”, which is inclined towards inflicting oppression on others. As such, it should refer to an individual’s attributes and to those who are inflicting social, economic, political and religious oppression on others. These can be individuals from any background.

Whilst the participants generally agreed that the city environment provided more opportunities, their sense of social justice, in terms of at least not having to face based-discrimination in society, was mixed. Despite less social discrimination in the city compared to their home villages, Dalits had to disguise their identity on many occasions and negotiate their rights in the city differently, often in a ways that were not from choice but from compulsion.

Some respondents pursued strategies to hide, obscure or create an ambivalent identity as a coping mechanism against caste-based discrimination and to increase employment opportunity. The process of identity formation was through both de-Digitisation and re-Dalitisation, depending upon the circumstances in which individuals had to conduct themselves.

4.5.1. De-Dalitisation

In small rural villages Dalits are highly visible as everybody knows everybody, so it is virtually impossible for them to act strategically to distance themselves from their caste, which is ascribed by default at birth and is fixed and unchangeable. It was also difficult for them to change their occupation because of limited employment opportunities in rural areas and they often depend on higher caste non-Dalits for their livelihoods. However, the bigger space and dynamic nature of the city facilitates more individualistic behaviour providing flexibility to redefine identity. In some circumstances, redefining identity was not a choice but a necessity to avoid discrimination. Many participants (almost 70%) had changed their surnames and used their sub-castes as a way of hiding their caste by masking or altering them, which Folmar (2007) referred to as the “Politics of Anonymity” (p. 45).

There were three ways the respondents pursued to de-Dalitise themselves. Firstly, by blatantly lying about their caste, which was mostly done in order to secure rented rooms and houses in the city, as the participants had experienced hardship in finding accommodation because of their caste. In particular, Dalit students who were studying in schools and colleges reported to have struggled to rent flats and rooms in the city as non-Dalits are hesitant to rent out rooms to Dalits (B.K., 2007). They often had to seek accommodation in other Dalit households, which were in short supply as few Dalits had a house of their own in the city. One of the participants, who moved to Pokhara from the neighbouring Baglung district to attend college, shared his experience of trying to rent a room:

“... I was desperate for accommodation and looking everywhere to live. I deposited an advance after viewing the flat ... the landlord liked that I was a student and could help his children with their coursework sometimes... upon discovering that I was a Dalit, I was denied the flat and he returned the deposit...”

[Male 25 years old]

Some respondents used their Dalit sub-caste (Gotra) to hide their Dalit identity. For example, there are more than 126 Gotras within the Pariyar caste. Gotra surnames can be similar to those commonly used by higher castes such as Adhikari and Gautam for Pariyar; Ghimire for Bishwokarma and Dawadi and Koirala for Nepali (Sarki). The use of Gotra thus provides relative anonymity in urban areas where migrants are not known personally by other people, compared to their native towns and villages where almost everyone knows everyone else. The use of Gotra has advantages over blatantly lying about their own caste, which they considered as a loss of their souls. The use of such surnames provided more confidence to introduce themselves and interact with others who are less likely to be aware of their real castes.

“... Koirala jaat bhane pachhi kurai sakiyo, budho le chhori dela bhane dar (When I mention Koirala is my caste that’s the end of the story, it’s quite scary though... thought the old man might give me his daughter...)”

[Male, 28 years old]

Similar voiced were echoed by even those respondents who were talented and educated as they were rejected relationship with non-Dalit as one respondent said:

“... I really fancied this Brahmin girl at college... she was great and I was not too bad either... we laughed together... it was great... but when I proposed her on a fine sunny afternoon, I still remember the day and time ... it was 4.15 p.m. on 6th December 2002 she said ... *maile bhannu parda ta no nai ho... pachhi samasya huna sakcha kina bhane hamro jaat mildaina* (I will have to say no to your proposal as there might be problems in the future as we come belong to different castes)...”

[Male 31 years old]

Their experience was that if their caste sounded more like Brahmin/Chhetri other people did not question them too much and life became less complicated, at least in terms of not having to justify one’s caste again and face discrimination. Nonetheless, whilst some participants might feel more comfortable using these Gotra-based names instead of their original caste names, sometimes they are asked “which caste is it?” This makes them feel awkward and some of them reported to have struggled to react to such situations when asked to establish if they are Brahmins or Dalits. One respondent shared his annoyance:

“... I hate f***** caste... my caste is Tamata and it’s a caste, It’s not a b***** tamatar (local word for tomato), is it?...”

[Male, 27 years old]

However, whilst use of the Gotra as opposed to surnames to disguise one’s caste was commonly reported, some participants were also frustrated with the treatment they received from officials (usually high caste individuals) when preparing documents such as citizenship certificates. Usually but not always, officials mentioned their actual castes in brackets making reference to Dalit status. One of the participants showed his card and said:

“... Look what he wrote... {Ran Bahadur Adhikari (Damai) ... - name changed} ... why did he have to mention Damai... Look his name is Indra Prasad Adhikari (name changed)... he did not write Brahmin in brackets...”

[Male 34 years old]

4.5.2. Re-Dalitisation

The practice of alternating surnames (at least officially) did provide the participants some temporary breathing space for overcoming caste-based discrimination. However, such strategies neither change their caste affiliation nor help to reduce their long term vulnerability to caste-based discrimination, mainly because at one point people will ultimately find out the real caste affiliation of Dalits despite using sub-castes as their surnames. Therefore, they also face the same level of caste-based discrimination with other Dalits who are not using such sub-castes as their surnames. The government of Nepal has adopted affirmative action, offering quotas for many indigenous groups and Dalits in a range of aspects of governance including scholarships and employment opportunities. Some participants who had changed their surnames based on their Gotra reported that they wished they had not changed. When applying for jobs they were sometimes refused because their name did not match with the list of Dalit castes mentioned in the government document.

“... Last year I could not fill the forms for the medical entrance test... the officer said my caste (Ghimire) which I changed for Bishwokarma a few years back is not a Dalit caste... it was too late for the official verification... you know how things work at the government offices...”

[Male, 22 years old]

Participants opined that affirmative action and reservation policies were a positive development for improving educational and economic opportunities for previously marginalised communities

such as the Dalits in Nepal. Some participants were adamant that they would not change their official surnames based on Gotra to original ones as they were required to get their documents verified by government officials that the sub-caste they used in official documents such as education certificates, citizenship card and passport, is in fact a Dalit caste. They argued that government facilities such as scholarships and quotas for employment, which are designed as a part of wider affirmative policies, should be accessible to everyone without having to prove one's Dalitness.

"...Now we are having to prove our caste as Dalit... previously being labelled as Dalit was a trouble... now not being Dalit is a trouble... when will they leave us alone..."

[Female, 35 years old]

The practice of anonymising Dalit identity through the use of Gotra and changing their surnames to sound like higher castes is considered to be a shameful act of not valuing one's identity; and attempting to re-Dalitise to obtain state benefits allocated for Dalits who take pride in their identity is selfish. As one of the participants in the focus group discussion argued:

"...Those are selfish individuals and do not uphold the Dalit ideology... *Tak Pare Tiwari natra Gotame* (if opportunity arises they are Tiwari - a high caste otherwise they are Gotame - a Dalit caste... they are selfish...")

[Female 19 years]

However, in order to avoid bureaucratic hassles, many participants who had previously switched their surnames based on their Gotra either changed or were thinking about changing it back to their original surnames.

The National Dalit Commission of Nepal (NDC-Nepal) has identified about 26 castes of which 7 are Hill Dalits (of which two belonged to the Newar community) and the remaining 19 Madhesi Dalits (NDC, 2014). Whilst all Dalit castes have suffered various forms of caste-based discrimination, the problems associated with these communities are not the same. This is partly because of different geographic locations, cultural practices, rites and rituals, and languages. Although untouchability has been the common suffering of all Dalits, their experience of social exclusion was varied, with Dalits in the Terai on the southern plains bordering India, facing more disadvantages than Dalits in the Hills. The problems encountered by Terai Dalits included landlessness, lack of citizenship, illiteracy, poverty, child marriage, dowry system, social boycott by non-Dalits and Sinopratha, a traditional practice of eating carcasses, mainly of goats, cows, oxen and buffaloes (NDC, 2014).

Similarly, Dalit sub-castes such as Poda and Chyame, despite being defined as Hill Dalits, have a language and cultural practices similar to the ethnic Newars of Kathmandu, who are Janajati. Some Newar castes disapproved of the use of the term Dalit to refer to them, as they consider their identity is different to other Dalits in Nepal. Furthermore, there is also rampant caste-based discrimination within the Dalit communities in Nepal, as some Dalit castes consider themselves to be superior to others, creating the "strictest caste exclusivity" (Weber, 1972). Earlier studies in India (Mandelbaum, 1970) demonstrated that caste hierarchy amongst the Dalit community is entrenched so that the "untouchables have their own untouchables" (p. 298). A critical reflection of intra-Dalit caste-based discrimination was also shared by one of the participants, as he put it:

"...We call for a united alliance against the oppressors. How you can have unity when we have so much division among ourselves? May be we should clean up our own mess first..."

[Male, 31 years]

Another effect of urbanisation was that the price of land in urban Pokhara rose dramatically (Rimal, 2013), which acted as an incentive to relocate for Dalit castes such as Poda and Chyame who lived in the centre of Pokhara city. The Podas migrated to the neighbouring Begnas area from Poda tole of Pokhara after selling their land at a higher price to migrants from the neighbouring hills. They are collectively called Jalaris (fishermen) but had abandoned fishing and were working with the Pokhara municipality as cleaners. A similar observation was reported in an earlier study by Chhetri (2007). The Jalaris or Podas considered themselves to be of higher status compared to other Dalit castes, as they are descended from the Newar community of Kathmandu. One of the participants mentioned that their "natural caste" is Newar, not Dalit, and were frustrated at being labelled a Dalit, and said in a distinctively Newari tone:

"... *Aba Mha: Pooja garchhekai chha* (we observe Newari festival Mha Pooja)... *Newari nai bolchha* (We speak Newari)... *tai pani Dalit bhanchha* (still we are called Dalit)..., *Bujhna sakdaina hami ta* (We cannot understand this)..."

[Male, 45 years old]

Dalit communities not only have cultural heterogeneities, but also practice caste-based discrimination, including untouchability, amongst themselves. The endemic nature of such practices was argued rather cynically by a participant:

"...We need to clear up our own mess first... until we do something to eradicate intra-Dalit caste system, we will never overcome suppression from higher castes..."

[Male, 26 years old]

Such divisions and disunity, and worse still the practice of untouchability and other forms of caste-based discrimination, within Dalit communities has further complicated the process of creating a unified Dalit identity (Pariyar, 2013). The existence of intra-Dalit caste-based discrimination has created factionalism within Dalits, which provided opportunities for higher castes exploiters to obscure the common interests of those whose labour they live off, and it will persist as long as an exploiting class exists to wield it for this purpose (Bhattarai, 2003). As such, Dalits had little chance of making economic progress and bringing social transformation to the villages. Liberation from the village hegemony is a key reason for migrating to urban centres such as Pokhara

5. Conclusions

Whilst political debates have centred on the capital Kathmandu, a significant proportion of Nepal's population lives in villages, small cities and towns. As such, cities like Pokhara have played, and will continue to play, a major role in the lives of many individuals and communities, both politically and economically. Dalits in Nepal have suffered historical disadvantages economically. By moving from rural villages to cities they are able to commercialise their traditional occupations, advance educationally and become involved in raising political awareness. However, caste still remains a strong factor in their "adopted home". In Pokhara caste-based discrimination has continued in the city, although it is less pronounced compared to that in villages. The focus groups reveal that Dalits have used multiple methods as "coping strategies" and through de-Dalitisation and the "politics of anonymity" have benefited in the short term. However, these strategies have become counterproductive in the long term. Efforts to de-Dalitise oneself for individual identity have added complications in affirmative programmes, and are likely to have long-term implications for collective identity and weaken bargaining positions in the ongoing state restructuring process. Furthermore, there are

significant outstanding historical differences amongst the Dalits, and this is part of intra-Dalit caste-based discrimination. However, it is worth noting that because of historical subordination and relatively new awareness, the concept of ‘Dalit’ still remains a modern identity that is in the process of construction. Therefore, Dalits as an identity not only competes with older identities that assimilate the collective experience, but also those who are avoiding Dalit identity altogether make their collective agenda difficult to pursue during current political transitions to new constitution, state restructuring and long-term peace and development.

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