



Chapter 7

Challenging discrimination

What is it like to realise, from the moment that you are able to start to make sense of the world around you, that you are considered inferior to everyone else? That by touching someone you pollute them, that you must always show respect to other castes – turn your eyes away when speaking, never raise your voice to express an opinion (yours is worthless), wash out your glass if given something to drink (to remove your pollution), always squat outside a house when visiting rather than sit with others, be excluded from sacred places (as otherwise they too will become polluted)....

So much has been written on this subject, yet for anyone who has not experienced discrimination at first hand, it is not so easy to understand how it really feels. Nepal ratified the international convention against caste discrimination in 1971, and already had legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of “religion, race, sex, caste, tribe, ideological conviction or any of these” over 40 years ago (the Civil Rights Act 1955). Nevertheless, caste discrimination was still common practice in rural areas long after such legislation was passed – and has not disappeared today. Women, also, remain significantly disadvantaged, although some are more so than others; gender discrimination is a complex matter.

Finally, ethnic discrimination, whilst not specifically discussed in this chapter, is well illustrated with regard to the fate of the Sunwars, described in the brief history of Suri in chapter 2. Today there is a strong movement for a *Janajati* political voice and self-determinism that barely existed twenty years ago – indeed, the term itself (instead of the previously commonly used label of *matwali*, those drinking alcohol) marks a clear shift in positioning and identity.

In the Suri of the late 1980s, it was the Kamis (blacksmiths) who formed the largest group of Dalits, otherwise known in the past as “untouchables”, and who broadly remained the most isolated community. Living separately from other castes in their own hamlets, they practised relatively little seasonal migration, as they had enough guaranteed work through patron-client arrangements to keep going through the year. Wealthier families – particularly Chhetris and Newars – had “their” Kami who always took care of making any new tools they required or mending broken ones. In return they received an agreed amount of grain annually (the so-called “*mana pathi*” system, referring to

the volume of grain provided). This system locked those concerned into life as it was; they feared losing their regular source of income if they left to search for work elsewhere, yet what it provided was only enough to get by – rarely enough to save or invest in different ways to earn money. When I started to live in Suri, I naively thought that I would be exempted from any social discrimination patterns (given that I myself was a social anomaly), but I was soon corrected in this matter.

Aerogramme home: 4, 8 August 1988

The Kamis distress me. I thought that as a foreigner I wouldn't be bound by the same rules of refusing to eat their food and drink their water. However, everyone at Yermu earnestly assures me that if I commit the “offence” of eating Kami food, they will have to treat me like a Kami. That means I won't be allowed back inside their homes. This would be a complete disaster of course – and one that I find difficult to believe given the warmth of welcome that I have received so far. Everyone is very insistent on the matter, though....

On the day of my Kami visit, Yermu provided me with a bag of boiled potatoes and popcorn (cooked the previous evening) to take with me. It was an uncharacteristically small amount, perhaps to ensure that I did not share it, and I opened the bag miserably at the Kamis when they started eating their food. I was really not sure what to say, as the offering and sharing of food is so much a part of Nepali culture. A plate of steaming hot potatoes was then placed in front of me, forcing me to explain the situation. The Kamis laughed. “Take off the skins of the potatoes before you eat them”, they said (well, everyone does that anyway, as they generally don't wash off the mud fully before boiling them) “and then no harm will come”. So I did, sharing my food in the process, and feeling a lot happier. I guess that is the little charade that we will continue. Perhaps, too, the only thing that Yermu and others are worried about is the face value of things...

There was certainly a degree of double standards in “untouchability”, in that most people who travelled beyond the village admitted privately that they never refused to take food from someone of lower caste when outside home territory. Some even claimed they never tried to find out the caste of new people they met – though this I found rather implausible as it is usually part of introductory conversations, at least indirectly. (Surname is generally a good caste indicator; if that does not clarify matters, enquires about other relatives generally will.

Facial traits and skin pigmentation can also lead to ready assumptions). However equitable their behaviour outside the village, though, once back in their familiar surrounds, people returned to caste norms.

The other Dalit group in the village were the tailor-musicians, the Damai, who stitched clothes with varying degrees of skill - ranging from astounding speed and precision to the simply badly cut and badly sewn. The Damis were also called upon to bring out their instruments – drums, trumpets and a long horn not dissimilar from an alp horn (although more portable) – to celebrate weddings. As with the Kamis, the wealthier households had “their” Damai, and since the relationship was hereditary rather than selected on the basis of skill, it was not uncommon to hear complaints that “our” Damai had badly stitched an item of clothing. (To ask “Why should you be good at tailoring just because you are born into that caste?” was not considered a relevant question). Yermu had reason to complain in this regard, but they did not change their old Damai, as that would have been considered shameful. In economic terms, the Damai were often better off, as some of the sons had set up businesses in Kathmandu, making good money and sending it home. However, even if the Damai lived in better houses and had more livestock than many others, the label of Damai was indelible – they remained “untouchable” as far as everyone else was concerned.

The Damai and the Kamis did not mix or seek common strength together. In the hierarchy of the caste system, the Kamis considered themselves to be superior, and were careful to maintain this distinction. This is something that I discussed recently with a young Kami woman from Suri, Indu BK, who received a (Swiss-funded) scholarship to become a local development worker or “social mobiliser”. She now lives and works in Charikot.

Diary extract, September 2010

Indu has a broad smile and easy, confident manner. We have finished discussing her training and current work, and I ask what has been in my mind since meeting her: has she personally experienced discrimination - in her childhood or in her current work? Indu laughs, and says that the biggest problem she encountered was with her mother, who refused to allow a very close friend (mit¹) of her father into their home on the grounds of him being a Damai. Her mother was sticking to caste principles in treating him as beneath them. Indu says that it took a lot of talking to persuade her mother to relax her principles, but she managed. She adds that, “I gained my scholarship to become a social mobiliser because of my caste, and I am proud to be a Dalit. In my work I have not generally faced any discrimination, although back in the village I used to have problems with Bahuns and Chhetris”. Her answer is both impressive and heartening – she is so positive.

So for Indu, the “last bastion” of caste discrimination was her own mother. Whilst this might seem strange,

her mother’s perspective should be seen in the light of discrimination that she had experienced herself. If you have been treated as inferior all your life, you could find comfort in demonstrating superiority over someone else.

Looking back, I wonder what would have happened if I had deliberately and openly eaten food prepared by Kamis and Damais. I was far too uncertain of my position to do so – I wished to be accepted, to learn rather than to challenge. It is easy to take a different stance now. In today’s Nepal, and especially since the civil conflict came to an end and hopes of fundamental societal change have grown, discrimination on the basis of caste is no longer broadly accepted. Indeed, there is prestige in fighting it: Indu’s comments on being proud to be a Dalit echo a growing Dalit pride. There is no denying that Dalits remain disadvantaged,² but at the same time, with varying degrees of success or failure, many are now challenging the status quo.³ Fighting for Dalit rights has become a political issue that has united many amongst them in a common cause - often, under the Maoist banner.⁴

In a village such as Suri, where outside influences are quite strong, there is clear awareness nowadays that caste discrimination is better not openly demonstrated. For some this is a welcome change; others simply adopt more subtle means of indicating their perceived superior status – including the avoidance of personal interactions wherever possible. A whole mindset based on generations of prejudice is not changed overnight. As for how the Damais and Kamis have reacted to the more open social climate, it is striking how those who have gone outside the village (such as Indu, and Hem Bahadur Ghatane - chapter 6) have been more successful in changing their lives than those who have stayed.

Diary extract, September 2008

Hasta Lal is squatting at his forge, with his left hand turning the wheel that works the bellows, whilst in his right he holds some pincers with which he turns a thin piece of steel in the blazing heat. He is making a hasiya (sickle), a tool in which he has a particular specialisation. A man who just left bearing several new sickles had come from a village half a days’ walk away to buy them from him, as Hasta Lal has a reputation for producing quality articles. He seems to have hardly changed in twenty years. He is blackened with soot and charcoal from his work, his ragged clothes are spotted with holes from where a stray spark caught the material, and his squatted position by the bellows is just as I remember. What is different is the absence of his kindly elderly father, now deceased, and the presence of a good number of children, some of whom are his own.

Hasta Lal has four children now; the eldest, Moti, is the only one who was already born back in the days when I sat at the forge. Moti – whose name somewhat incongruously means “pearl” - was then a toddler. His mother Tirtamaya would leave him with his father to play in the forge, and he often waddled so close to hot metal that it made my heart miss

a beat – though nothing untoward ever happened. He just learned his trade from a young age.



So where is Moti now? Hasta Lal explains proudly that he has gone to Kathmandu, where he works as a blacksmith. He has married there – a good match. They have a photo of his bride; Tirtamaya disappears into the house to fetch it. She reappears bearing a large colour photo taken in a studio, showing a serious and pale-skinned girl (the colour of her skin is commented upon with much approval). The photo, alas, has seen better days; rats have gnawed a large part of one corner, and it is smudged with dirt. Tirtamaya bewails the rats in a voice that indicates resignation to a life of co-residence with them. She is blind in one eye and has always given off an attitude of fatalism – “what will be, will be” could be her motto.

Hasta Lal says that he stayed in the village because he has work here, and going outside involves considerable risk. He is nevertheless pleased that his son has bettered himself - in the eyes of everyone in the Kami hamlet, at least. Hasta Lal has made small improvements in his life; he has renovated his house so it is a little bigger, bought some land, and has a buffalo whereas before he had only a few goats. He acknowledges, too, that caste differences are enforced less overtly than they used to be – we sit openly sharing food, without any sense of daring. However, he does not consider that things have radically changed as far as he is concerned; the forge and all that it implies is still his way of life.

It is different for Kaili, with whom I spent many days in the past, but whose husband I rarely saw. He was always absent, earning money on seasonal migration outside the village.

Diary extract, September 2008

Kaili is happy. She tells me her news as she bids us sit on squares of Tibetan rugs by the fire inside her house, and serves hot milk from china mugs (the mugs, rugs and indeed milk are small luxuries not found in every home). They have bought land, and built a house, near Suri Dhoban, along the main path at the bottom of the valley. Soon they will move there, when her husband comes back from India. She is not exactly sure where he is – maybe it is Sikkim – but he will be home within a year, and then they will move. Their new land should be good for growing fruit trees, and they will open a shop, so she will be able to give up working hard in the fields. They will keep their ties with the village, however – they won't sell the land and house that they have here. They want their son to have the land (they have one son and three daughters – of whom one is physically handicapped), and plan to build a new house for him on one of the terraces.

We talk about doing well, and who in the village has not done well, and Kaili is clear. Those who are genuinely poor are people who are physically weak – who are sick, and unable to look after themselves, or are disturbed because they have lost people close to them. If you are fit in mind and body, and able to work, you are not really disadvantaged – you have the choice to work hard or not. I reflect that Kaili always was a positive thinker – although she was and is thwarted on certain issues. Her handicapped daughter is a worry to her and her husband, but they have just accepted that the girl's deformity (caused by a bad home delivery) is a fact of life, and have never sought medical treatment for her. It is almost certainly too late to do much now, as the girl is in her early teens. Yet it is the type of problem that could probably have been ameliorated when the girl was small.

As a Dalit village woman, Kaili's life opportunities have not been great, but she and her husband have worked hard together to improve their lot, and the future of their children. As a woman, it is difficult and uncommon to be able to determine one's path in life – so much is decided by one's father, brothers and husband. To remain single is to defy social norms. Hindu culture dictates that men have authority over the family, and they are expected to make all important decisions (ideally, taking the well-being of everyone into account – of course, in practice this varies). Women can only play a subservient role – although things are changing slowly. Jira Gurung (chapter 6) is an example of a growing attempt amongst village girls to gain independence although the fact that she belongs to a *Janajati* group means that it is easier for her to break out of the mould than for others.

Twenty years ago, I was very conscious of my privileged position. As a foreign woman of independent means, men and women alike accepted in me behaviour that they would have strongly criticised in a village woman (and particularly an unmarried one, as I was then). I could roam wherever I wanted, get into conversation with anyone and feel welcome in so doing, but a village woman could not. This was especially true amongst those placing greatest

emphasis on Hindu ritual purity, the Chhetris and Bahuns. Whilst men are broadly dominant over women, Hindu culture nevertheless has a complex and ambiguous attitude to women – as has been the subject of much study.

The anthropologist Lynn Bennett describes in detail how a Hindu woman is considered ritually pure and is cherished in her natal home (her *maitha*), whereas the sexual qualities that she assumes in her married home (her *ghar*) render her ritually dangerous, potentially luring her husband away from family solidarity.⁵ How this plays out in practice is that the young daughter-in-law is viewed with some suspicion when she arrives in her married home. She has to prove herself. In so doing, she is commonly expected to do the hardest physical work and most unpleasant chores, eat the remaining food when all others have been served and taken their fill, and generally comply with the wishes of others in the household without complaint. The mother-in-law can become the main tyrant in this regard, in a perpetuating cycle of uneasy female relationships. The badly treated daughter-in-law dreams of the day that she can be a mother-in-law herself, ruling the family home whilst a dutiful young daughter-in-law eases her work burden. The birth of a son gives her this prospect, whilst that of a daughter does not. Indeed, a spin-off in conventional marriage stakes is that the youngest son of a family tends to make a poor prospect, as his wife is likely to face the nagging of her mother-in-law for many years (it is the youngest son who inherits both the family home and the care of his parents in it). Similarly, a young woman will tend to hope for a husband whose family lives not too far away, so that in times of difficulty, she can readily seek comfort in her natal home.

The way in which Hindu culture shapes female relationships partially explains why it is not always men who insist most strongly on gender roles. Older women can be the greatest adherents to custom and tradition. Nevertheless, back in the late 1980s, attitudes were already less strict than they had once been. For example, a report commissioned by SDC in 1990 on changes that had occurred in the Dolakha area following development interventions noted a number of positive changes.⁶ One was that some high caste men reported that they no longer expected their wives to wait for them to eat before eating themselves. This was a clear rejection of the traditional view that cooked rice taken from a pot from which the wife has already served herself is ritually polluting for the husband. Similarly, the traditional, ritually demeaning practice of the wife having to greet her husband each morning by bowing to his feet – which sometimes includes ritual bathing of the feet and drinking of the water – was reported to be declining. This latter custom I observed in a number of Chhetri households when I lived in Suri, and I suspect that it continues today in some of them.

One of the obvious ways in which the ritual impurity – and inferiority – of women is expressed in Hindu culture

is with regard to menstruation. The publicly degrading way in which this was treated in higher caste households was in sharp contrast to my Western perception of it being a private matter – and one that if disclosed, would only evoke sympathy for the discomfort entailed.

Aerogramme home, 11 July 1988

Daughter-in-law is huddled in the corner – a rare break from work. She's just started her period and so cannot go into the kitchen. A menstruating woman is considered ritually unclean – she should not cook food (at least not for any man); she has to eat by herself, sleep in a separate room (daughter-in-law in any case sleeps on the floor – it's common for only the husband to have a bed), be careful not to touch any male relatives or even cows lest she defile them in so doing.... You might suppose that having your period could be a nice opportunity for a rest, but it's not at all like that. She's just treated with scorn and given unpleasant tasks. It's all so demeaning! A family like this can afford all these rituals, of course – in poorer families, especially those without another woman to take over, the woman basically has to commit ritual sin. I'm referring to Bahun and Chhetri households – it's not the same in the households of Tamangs and Sherpas, who are much more down to earth in such matters.

Interestingly, my mother responded saying that her own mother had been brought up in the belief that a menstruating woman should not bake bread, as it would not rise, and that she had heard other “wives tales” regarding activities to be avoided when menstruating. Unease with “defiling” menstrual blood is of course true of many cultures beyond Hinduism (most obviously Muslim and Jewish, but also in many other African and Caribbean cultures), although it seemed far less of an issue amongst the Buddhists I knew. More generally, as already shown in chapter 4, women often experience discrimination in access to health services – especially in matters related to child-bearing.

Of all life-determining decisions, that of marriage is the most crucial one for a village woman's future. It used to be a decision over which she had no – or very little – influence, particularly in the case of Bahuns and Chhetris. The Bahun family with whom I stayed provided a particular demonstration of this. The father lived outside the village with a second wife, but he nevertheless decided all important family matters, including the marriage partner of both his son, Madusudan, and his daughters, Gayatri and Urmilla. Whilst well aware of the norm of arranged marriages, I was still shocked by the dictatorial, non-consultative manner in which this was done – and the relatively young age of all the parties.

Aerogramme home – no date, late 1988

There was a general sense of gloom around the kitchen this evening; Gayatri's absence is so palpable. It all happened so quickly – I don't think Gayatri was consulted at all. It seems that the first time she met her husband was at the wedding ceremony. Mother says it is a good match, but I know she

is trying to put on a brave face; she would have preferred a later marriage. Gayatri is only 17, after all, and had been doing well at her studies. Mother was clearly hopeful that she would finish school and only marry afterwards. Poor Urmilla is looking pensive in the corner, and I don't blame her – it's so obvious that her brother is unhappy with the choice of wife that their father made for him. For that matter, Radika is not happy either – how could she be, when treated with such scorn? Now that Gayatri is gone, it will be Urmilla's turn next. Since she will clearly have no choice either, all I can hope is that the decision that is made proves to be a fortuitous one...

In fact, Urmilla's marriage turned out to be the happiest of the three. Radika now lives separately from Madusudan (who married a second wife), whilst of Gayatri, news is mixed.

Diary extract, April 2008

As we walk through past the shops of Borole, there's a familiar figure sitting at the chautara. Radika, looking confident and at ease, is chatting with a shop-keeper. She's come to buy some fertilizer, and is waiting for a friend to join her for the walk back – but is soon persuaded to join us. The fertilizer weighs 15kg – not an excessive weight, and she readily keeps pace with us. We chat about times past and present. She laughs about how she was 20 years ago, saying that then she knew nothing, she was always afraid to speak for fear of saying something stupid, and she just had to do whatever her mother-in-law told her. That, indeed, was how it was. I cannot remember ever having a real conversation with Radika – partly because she was kept busy, and partly, I must admit, because I also assumed that she had nothing much to say. She tended to wear a rather vacant expression, and never ventured an opinion of her own. Hunched, dumpy, and usually rather scruffy, her hair was often awry, and her clothes worn with little care. It's only now that I realise that this was probably part of her coping mechanism at the time – stubborn resistance.

The Radika of today – a woman in her mid thirties - holds herself with pride and determination, and needs no prompting to talk. My colleagues know her, because she is the secretary of the Okhrini community forest; she is also a Women's Health Volunteer, and is clearly generally active in the village. Everyone seems to know Radika these days. Apart from her community work, one reason may be the simple fact that she lives alone. This is most unusual, and flies in the face of all traditional norms, especially as it represents a deliberate choice on Radika's part. She has borne two sons; the first is now a young man of 19, already making a living as an "engineer", whilst the second, now 17, is studying in Charikot. They no longer need her presence in their daily lives. Her husband, Madusudan, lives in Dolakha with a second wife; his mother also lives with him. Apparently they have told her to join them, but Radika refuses, saying that she prefers village life. It is not difficult to see why; here she is a person in her own right, and with them she will only ever be the chore-fulfilling daughter-in-law.



On the night before we leave, we stay at Radika's house – where I used to stay when spending time in Surigaon. My former room, in the building opposite the main house, is used now as a store and to accommodate occasional guests. My colleagues make use of it for the night. Most things are more or less as I remember them – if a little more dilapidated. The house doesn't seem to have had a coat of white-wash for a little while, and there is moss growing in the odd crack here and there. A positive change is a solar-powered light with which Radika lights the kitchen; and a radio (powered from the same source) that she has playing constantly in the background. The use of a radio was very carefully controlled in the past, to save batteries.

After we have eaten, Radika shows my colleagues to their room, and then insists that I use her room at the front of the house. It is just a small room with a narrow bed, newspaper pasted to the rough wooden walls. Her clothes hang on a few nails – she doesn't have many, although a couple of saris for special occasions are folded away separately. She pulls out a small battered metal trunk from beside the bed, and from it removes a photo album – actually one that I had given her earlier, and into which she has now placed all her family photos. There are perhaps 20 in total; we study first pictures of chubby little boys, then serious, slightly skinny children dressed in school uniform, and then tall, gangly adolescents – bearing a strong resemblance to their father 20 years ago. There is a picture of Gayatri, Radika's elder sister-in-law, now in her mid thirties with a husband and four children. Then there is an older Urmilla – also with a husband and children, staring fixedly at the camera. They are happy, says Radika. I am at least glad for Urmilla.

Radika puts away her photo album carefully, and leaves me to sleep. I think of her putting off the light, turning off the radio, and sleeping here alone each night. It is so contrary to Nepali custom. No-one ever seemed to understand my wish to sleep alone when I lived in the village; I was always being provided with offers of "bahinis" – younger sisters – willing to sleep in my room and keep me company. Yet here is Radika living all alone in a whole house. It certainly takes some courage.

The next morning, we are awoken early by someone calling Radika to attend a health worker training session. Someone else is asking for vitamin A capsules, which she duly hands out. Yet another person calls on the matter of some goats; Radika is rushing around attending to everything - not least ensuring that her guests have tea and snacks before departing. One thing disturbs me, and I question her: playing the role of a Bahun. On this she is clear; she has many friends amongst the Sunwars and Chhetris, but if a Kami or Damai comes to her door, he or she still has to sit outside, and if given a cup of tea, rinse his or her cup afterwards. Radika obviously sets importance on her superior caste status. Given her vulnerable position, this is understandable, although it still seems a pity that in fighting her own battle for self-determination, she cannot take up the cause of others.

This, then, is Radika's choice: during the day, active village member, respected by others, sought out for help and advice, busy tilling the land and raising her few goats for occasional sale. During the night, a woman alone with her photos, who cooks and eats a meal as quickly as possible with the radio for company, and then retires to her solitary room. This choice, furthermore, is not entirely hers to make – it depends on the good will of her husband, Madusudan. As a wife, Radika owns neither the house in which she lives nor the land she tills; all belongs to him, and will be inherited on his death by their sons. If ever he or they decide to sell, Radika will have no choice but to leave.⁷

Radika's case is an exceptional one, but nevertheless indicative of changing attitudes. To live on her own as she does would have been unthinkable 20 years ago; likewise, her participation in so many village activities is in keeping with a growing trend of women's involvement in village development. Although as a Bahun, she is defying a particularly strong traditional role of female passivity and family-centred behaviour, she also has the innate sense of superiority from her caste to give her the confidence to do so. Lower caste women tend to be less confident, and more hesitant to participate in community actions, with the result that higher castes often dominate – and are disproportionately favoured. Much depends on the thrust of the intervention. A review of the Rural Health Development Project, for example, found that through the project emphasis on good governance, Mother's Groups often provided a means for women of all caste and ethnic backgrounds to come together, share experiences and together gain in knowledge.⁸

Another aspect of Radika's story is quite common in

Suri: that of men taking second wives. Strictly speaking, polygamy is illegal in Nepal, punishable by brief imprisonment and a fine, but the law is rarely enforced in such situations. In any case, it does not invalidate second marriages that have taken place. Typically, the first marriage is an arranged one at a fairly early age, fulfilling family expectations. The legal age for women to marry (with parental consent) is 16; for men it is 18, and marriages at this age are still quite common. In fact Radika was married at the age of 14. Once children have been produced from the union – again, in accordance with expectations of ensuring the family lineage – and assuming the man has some financial means, he feels that he has done his duty and can please himself by finding a wife of his own choice. He may even marry across caste lines.

Of course the second wife is likely to wish for children of her own, so two families often result – the second commonly shunned by the man's family, who do not wish to see family property further divided. The first wife, left on her own in her married home, is in a difficult position, pitied or scorned for having failed to keep her husband by her side, and often expected to do more than her fair share of chores. Wives in this position would complain to me that without a husband to argue their cause, they were powerless. The second wife, meanwhile, often has her own worries – facing a degree of societal disapproval, and being uncertain of her own and her children's livelihood and inheritance prospects should the husband leave or die.

The overall result is almost inevitably a lot of resentment and unhappiness. In the case of one Chhetri family with whom I spent a lot of time, the man has married two sisters and split the family house horizontally, creating two homes with two hearths. The elder sister occupies the upper part of the house with her two children; the younger, the lower – she also has two children. It is not an easy situation for any of those concerned, as even passing remarks made jokingly betray,

"So there we were together in Jiri, he and me, and this person we met asked us how many children we have. He said four, I said two – exactly at the same time! The man looked at us so strangely!"

As for the idea of a woman taking a second husband, this goes against Hindu tradition, even if the woman is widowed at a young age. She is considered an unlucky prospect for marrying again, and often has to return to her natal home. However, attitudes in this respect are changing, and in urban areas remarriage does happen – there are even websites for those who have also lost a first spouse to seek a new partner with a similar history.

Amongst Buddhists there is, overall, more openness and consultation when it comes to choice of marriage partners. I know, for example, of no Tamang or Sherpa men who have taken a second wife whilst the first is living

– one Tamang man commented to me drily that this would only make for tears. In Tibetan society, polyandry is of course widely reported as traditional practice, often one woman being married to several brothers. When asked, Suri villagers considered this idea to be a very strange one.

Are things changing for women in Nepal? There is a reasonably vocal, urban-based women's movement, though it tends to be dominated by higher caste women. At policy level, there is recognition in Nepal that gender discrimination exists and should be tackled, but there is still a long way to go before Nepali women are equal with men by law⁹ - and even further for this to be the case in practice. Change in the attitudes of both men and of women is needed for it to happen.

Endnotes

- 1 The custom of *mit* entails a special friendship, initiated in a ceremony between the two parties. In it they exchange gifts and declare lifelong friendship. They subsequently treat their *mit* as a relative, supporting them emotionally and sometimes financially, and always making them welcome in their home. In the event of death, a *mit* is mourned as one would a relative. For Indu's mother to try to deny her husband's *mit* access to her home was an act of major defiance towards her husband. At the same time, in forming a *mit* friendship with a Damai, her husband was making a social statement against caste norms.
- 2 Exactly who falls into the category of Dalit is somewhat contested; Dalit political groups claim their numbers to be nearly 20% of the population, whilst the 2001 census recorded a figure of 13%. Whatever the exact figure, Dalits are very poorly represented in the bureaucracy, legislature and mainstream political parties – a fact that has sparked the creation of specifically Dalit political parties. One Dalit-run website states that approximately 80% of all Dalits live below the poverty line, although other reports place the figure at 50%. Similarly, Dalit average life expectancy is given as 50.8 years against the national average of 58 years, and the literacy rate as 23% against the national average of 54%. See: <http://www.jagaranmedia.org.np/index.php> Given the difficulty in collecting data, all figures need to be treated with caution (and in any case, Nepal only began generating systematic data on caste and ethnicity in 1991).
- 3 A quote from a detailed study funded by the World Bank and DFID is illustrative in this regard: "After centuries of thinking about themselves as subjects of feudal rulers, more and more Nepalis are beginning to see themselves as citizens of a democratic state... This change in self perception has also altered expectations: people do not want favours from the powerful. Instead of patronage, they want rights – the same rights accorded to every citizen by law. They want uniform 'rules of the game.'" World Bank and DFID (2006) *Unequal Citizens Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal*
- 4 At a conference held in Nepal in June 2010 that brought together many activists, politicians, scholars and others interested in Dalit rights, this was discussed at some length. It was noted that although "the Maoists used Dalits as cannon fodder in their war, they nonetheless brought the issue of Dalits to the fore." Conference Report *Envisioning New Nepal: Dynamics of Caste, Identity and Inclusion of Dalits* Godavari Village Resort; organised by Samanta Foundation Nepal. Quote from page 13.
- 5 Bennett, L. (1983) *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters* Columbia University Press New York.
- 6 Adhikary, P. K., Pfaff-Czarnecka, J. and Shrestha, M.R. (1990) *Opinions and Perceptions Survey Rapid Rural Appraisal of IHDP/LJRP Impacts in Central and Eastern Panchayats of IHDP area* SDC/INFRAS Impact Monitoring Project.
- 7 According to CEDAW (2003), women make up more than 65 percent of the labour force employed in agriculture in Nepal, but the majority of them are family workers who receive no financial remuneration for their labour. They account for only 6 percent of total landowners with a combined share of 4% of all arable land. Whilst in the past, unmarried daughters had to wait until they reached the age of 35 to have the right to inherit family property along with sons, the law has been changed and they are now eligible from any age (although their brothers are still highly motivated to have them marry, as in so doing women lose all hereditary rights to natal property). See: CEDAW (2003), Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, combined second and third periodic report of States parties, Nepal, CEDAW/C/NPL/2-3 and <http://www.wikigender.org/index.php/Nepal>
- 8 Molesworth, K., Karki, Y. and Koirala, I. (2005) *Rural Health Development Project, Nepal Report of the 2005 External Review*. Swiss Tropical Institute, Basel. Conducted on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- 9 Nepal has ratified the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports.htm>. However, for the convention to be implemented fully requires substantial change in the country's legislation.