

Dalit lives must matter

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A rally in Kathmandu in 2022 demanding action against the killings.

· In July 2016, 18-year-old Ajit Mijar and Kalpana Parajuli got married in a Kavre village. Parajuli’s family opposed the inter-caste marriage and forced the two to annul the union. Five days later, Mijar’s body was found buried on the banks of the Trisuli in Dhading district.

Mijar’s death was ruled a suicide, but his family has refused to perform his last rites, insisting that he was murdered for daring to marry a ‘high’ caste woman. His body has remained at the TU Teaching Hospital morgue for the past seven years.

· In May 2020, the body of a 12-year-old Dalit girl was found hanging from a tree in the Rupandehi’s Devdaha village. She had been raped and murdered after being forcibly married to her rapist, an ‘upper’ caste man, the day before she was killed.

· On the same day in May 2020, Nabaraj BK and his friends Ganesh Budha Magar, Tikaram Nepali, Lokendra Sunar, Govinda Shahi, and Sanju BK were lynched and their bodies dumped into the Bheri River in Soti village of Rukum West. They were killed because villagers discovered Nabaraj was going to elope with a teenage girl from a ‘higher’ Thakuri caste.



Nabaraj BK (far left, above) and five of his friends who were killed on 23 May 2020 in Rukum West because he was eloping with a 'higher' caste teenager.

· In May 2022, Sundar Harijan, a 20-year-old Dalit inmate at Rolpa jail who was serving a life sentence on behalf of another prisoner died under suspicious circumstances. An investigation pointed to police corruption, but the probe yielded no further results.

· In March this year, a restaurant owner in Gorkha beat 36-year-old Phulmaya Pariyar to death, because her 7-year-old daughter drank a beverage without permission. The issue was settled after the hotelier, Durga Ale, provided Pariyar’s family with financial compensation.

· Last month, a 22-year-old Dalit man was injured in Simraungad when a priest poured hot rice starch over him for entering the temple.

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These are just a selection of **acts of violence against Nepal’s Dalit community** that made it to the news. There are many more cases that are never reported, and the lifelong oppression that Dalits face every day all over Nepal is not news.

“Sadly, political turbulence, civil governance, impunity, and lack of accountability to our people have undermined the Dalit achievements, moments and people’s aspirations,” said Pradip Pariyar, founder of the Dalit Lives Matter Global Alliance during a talk last week.

He added: “The role of social justice seems murky, foggy and lost. Nepali society is becoming more regressive in comparison to other countries. It seems like Dalits belong to the country, but not to the state.”

The **murders of Nabaraj BK and his friends** in Rukum West three years ago catapulted caste-based violence to the forefront of national and political discourse in a way other atrocities against Nepal’s Dalit community had not in recent years.

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But when it came to justice, all that public outrage did not seem to matter. Attempts to sweep the murders under the rug began right from the top. Home Minister Janardan Sharma from the Maoist party that once waged war for Dalit rights, claimed the deaths of the young men was not caste-related, and they had all jumped into the Bheri River.

Sharma’s remarks were seen as an attempt to cover up the involvement of Soti ward chair and fellow Maoist Dambar Bahadur Malla, who had been arrested for involvement in the murders. Three years later, justice continues to elude the families of Nabaraj BK and his friends. The final hearing of the case is scheduled for 13 June.

Article 40 of Nepal’s Constitution guarantees the rights of Dalits to political competition and representation, as well as basic services like education and health, but Dalit representation in politics and in the workforce is tokenism at best.

Nepal’s 2021 Census results did not include information about the country’s ethnic, linguistic, and religious demographics. But the 2011 census showed that Dalits made up 13.6% of Nepal’s population (researchers say the figure could be as high as 20%) but they hold only 0.7% of senior civil service jobs. Brahmins, on the other hand, are 12.2% of the population but have 72% of senior government jobs.

“The demand for Dalits is for an equal share in the nation’s wealth until they are equally represented at decision-making levels,” said Suraj Yengde, PhD, one of India’s leading Dalit scholars and author of Caste Matters who is in Nepal to research a new book.

“Until the nation’s wealth is equally distributed to us, there cannot really be a truly democratic society. Minority communities cannot control the majority resources,” said Yengde, who is a research associate with the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University and was recently named a Senior Fellow at the Kennedy School.



A rally in Chaujhari of Rukum West demanding justice for the six slain men (Photo: Bignewskhabar)

“Caste is normalised in Nepal, India, and the rest of South Asia through the practice of retaining the hegemony of the historical oppressor castes who then control the resources of the state and then become the final adjudicator of the matters concerning the nation,” he added during the talk (*see interview below*).

During local elections in May 2022, three mayors, eight deputy mayors, 143 ward chairs, and 878 ward members were elected from the Dalit community — each less than 3% of the total elected members from each category in 2017. In federal polls, there were only 16 Dalit MPs out of 275, the lowest proportion since Constituent Assembly elections in 2008. And only one of those 16 Dalit MPs was directly elected and the rest were nominated through the proportional representation system.

Meanwhile, three Dalit leaders were elected to the Provincial Assembly directly, while 28 were elected through the PR system. The number of elected leaders from the Dalit community for both the federal parliament and provincial assembly is less than during the 2017 election.

The Dalit Lives Matter movement gained traction in Nepal following the Rukum killings. But even as the discourse surrounding discrimination and violence against the Dalits continues, some activists want to move beyond the narrative of just being portrayed as victims of the **caste hierarchy** and take into account their stories of resistance to historical oppression.

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But information about equality and representation, insight from scholars and activists, are not accessible to Dalit and non-Dalit communities in rural and remote Nepal – even though people there are more likely to be victims of caste-based discrimination and violence.

It is now up to the civil society to figure out how to ensure that the message of equality, representation and resistance gets to the grassroots, said Yengde: “Dalit lives matter because our stories and our individuality matter. It is because dignity, respect, compassion, humanity, resistance, honour, and justice matters.”

Cast light on discrimination



*Suraj Yengde, PhD, is a leading Dalit scholar and author of the book **Caste Matters**. He is a research associate with the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University and was recently named Senior Fellow at the Kennedy School. Yengde is in Nepal to work on his new book, and look at the status of Nepal’s Dalit community. Excerpts of a conversation with Nepali Times this week:*

Nepali Times: You have spent some time in Nepal researching your new book. What are the impressions you have gathered about exclusion and caste issues here compared to India?

Suraj Yengde: I’m slightly hesitant to respond to this, simply because I have to see more of Nepal. I spent some time in Lumbini, but couldn’t really meet people from the Dalit community there. I was, however, able to meet the Gandharva people, and was so profoundly impressed with the men and women, especially of the younger generation. They were engaged in community farming using commune models similar to Dr Ambedkar’s ideals. And since community farming is something that is very close to me— it provided me insight into community life in Nepal.

But this is just a take from interacting with a limited number of people, especially given that the Nepali Dalit community is so vibrant. And I will be very sincere in saying that I may not be able to do everything right because I’m not an expert on Nepal. That is why I have been relying on two things: firstly, my primary respondents who are

prominently from various Dalits communities as well as experts, and secondly, recorded textual evidence that civil society has preserved. So, I think this question might merit a more elaborate response when my next book comes out.

It seems casteism transcends borders and is entrenched even among the Indian and Nepali diaspora. Why is it that education does not seem to make a big enough dent against caste discrimination?

Caste is basically a reproduction of the identity of a community and the resources available to it, but the normalisation of this reality is worrisome. Because Nepal is still a young country with a profoundly invested Constitution, and as such, the nation needs to be shaped with appropriate ethical standards.

What is needed first is a respectful sharing of this nation’s wealth with all of its people. Moreover, caste unfortunately has an intricate attachment to religion. So one might be confined to the caste system without even realising it. Another reality is that the caste system is upheld when people are confined within their own caste groups because that means that they are part of a network that everyone within that caste group benefits from.

As far as the diaspora goes, we need to question if the people who go beyond India and Nepal leave their roots behind during the process of assimilating to the West. And by that I mean not just their caste roots, or even national roots, but the ways of their ancestry.

So what one might think of an innocent incident or interaction or even celebration can be in fact deeply caste-based in nature, and there needs to be an acknowledgment that whatever pride one has for such interactions or events comes with certain caste attachments.

The question, therefore, is: are we taking active steps towards annihilating caste altogether? But at the same time, annihilating the caste structure does not necessarily mean you are dismantling all of your personal beliefs.

How do we ensure that the message of equality, representation and resistance goes to the grassroots in countries like Nepal and India, places where people are more likely to be victims of caste violence and discrimination?

Yes, oftentimes, the message we are trying to get across does not reach the people that they are meant for. Two things are needed to ensure that it does, and the first is the media to let the world know what is happening. We also need to figure out how to democratise information. It is also how we construct the narrative because high-flying jargon-filled academic ideas and talks and events will not go beyond a handful of people. So we need to tailor messages according to the intended receiver.

Once people have access to sufficient information, they will have formed opinions and then comes the role of mass movements. And so it ultimately comes down to how we decentralise information and diversify the audience.

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