

Envisioning an equitable space for marginalized people in Nepal: A journey of small strides through the novel ideas for social justice¹

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Abstract

Highly stratified caste-based social structure is generally taken for granted in order to maintain a societal status-quo in Nepal for centuries. Until the last quarter of the past century, the people in general were hardly cognizant of the fact that bottom segments of their population in the hierarchically stratified structure of the society were continuing to suffer heavily from all the possible faces of oppression. I was experiencing and internalizing within myself a need for a `big` change to happen to overturn alarmingly increasing level of difficulties faced by the oppressed lot of the population in every-day life especially in the most marginalized segment of the society of the 20th century. Clearly, I saw neither any quick-fixes of the anomalies nor any short-cuts for a change. Rather, I have been envisioning that the manifold impacts of oppression can only be averted by a two-pronged approach- improving generalized social equality and focusing on compensatory empowerment of the oppressed lot. At the same time, I was fully convinced that any strides made by individuals like myself for a `small change` could have an additive effects to the big change for eventual creation of an equitable space for every segment of the society, especially the marginalized people. In my own journey, I have tried to use the opportunities that came to me through my employment and social or professional affiliations to contribute to making those strides. Imagination, in my own mind, of the Pokhara valley and surrounding districts in the western hills as a milk-shed area through introduction of high-grade European blood exotic cattle in the mid-1980s for supplying abundance of milk to the then processing-ready Danish government donated dairy plant in Pokhara, founding of an international network of dalit information for uniting Dalit (oppressed) people for their empowerment through integration of relevant information resources, and initiating the idea of an open university of Nepal for removing manifold barriers of access to higher education are some examples of the strides that could have a far reaching impacts. Assessment of socio-economic impacts of the high-grade cattle introduced in the western hills of Nepal nearly 25 years ago would be subject of an economic analysis, but what was evident from the adoption of the new technologies such as high-grade cattle back then was a change in attitude of the people, breaking traditional barriers of living systems of the people paving a way for a new society. Also, a sense of increasing level of empowerment of Dalit intellectuals through the networking of nepaldalitinfo was evident with increasing intensity annually since 2003. Currently, there has began as a novel initiative of Nepali Diaspora living around the world that would be supported by the Government of Nepal for a cause of social justice to reach out to all segment of the Nepali population that are experiencing manifold barriers for accessing higher education. In this paper, I intend to present these three scenarios as the case-examples from my life experiences through a journey of small strides for a change leading to making small differences in the lives of those who need change the most.

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Introduction

The Himalayan region is naturally a celestial abode for the mankind to live. At the same time, over the past several centuries, the social values of the people living in the region have been deteriorating due to high influence of the feudal traditions of the past that are no longer relevant to the present time. Especially, the South Asian country Nepal remained socio-culturally stagnant throughout the first half of the 20th century, resulting in a failure to face the challenges thereafter to make the country socio-culturally congenial and adaptable for the people to live happily and meaningfully with the modern human dignity all the way to the beginning of the 21st century. The Himalayan Studies Conference, with the theme “Rethinking the Himalayas: The Indo-Tibetan Interface and Beyond” is an opportunity, perhaps long overdue, to give a whole new perspective to the region’s prevailing scenarios and its future scope. I am honoured to be speaking to this august audience in the conference and am thankful to the ANHS for this honor.

In addressing you in this plenary session, I am making a deliberate attempt to share my thoughts with you through a journey around my own life experiences¹ starting from my early life to one-time a vibrant veterinary professional in public service of Nepal working across many districts, and then making some twists and turns in the journey of my latter life to enter health and education professional fields serving the people of Nepal, Canada and beyond in more than one way. However, the purpose of my deliberation is to demonstrate some examples of my strides that might have been meaningful in making the difference in the lives of the people towards their ultimate goal of realizing a forward looking “change” in the society as a whole for creating an equitable space for marginalized population that would otherwise be left out from the mainstream socio-economic life and statehood.

As I have perceived, the inhabitants of Himalayan region in general, and Nepali people in particular, have had the chance from the time immemorial to take an advantage of food and other natural resources including their environment tapped from the Himalayan landscape, provided they are judicious in their utilization, while becoming accountable for any misfortune of the past. Unfortunately, ever since my childhood till date, I have seen a gross negligence on the part of mainstream population in Nepal in handling the societal structure, its functions and the environment around it. One of the inherent characteristics of Nepali society has been from the time immemorial that a person would like to see “high” or “low” in every other person. The “highs” are the masterly such as ruling class, elite class, land lords, and the “lows” are the subservient beings who are serving honestly the purpose of those “highs”. This gave rise to a system of discrimination by descent ultimately leading to oppressions of all possible faces (Young, 2000) and marginalization of the vulnerable and oppressed “lows” from the mainstream society. In Hindu tradition, it took eventually a religious turn with the “highs” posing themselves as the “good”, who in turn labelled the “lows” as the “evil” and “impure”. “Highs” continually commanded the rights unabatedly on resources, tangible or non-tangible, while the “lows” continued to be deprived of them. As a result of this situation continuing for far too long in the history of Nepal, the evidence of widespread inequalities existed among people according to their descent, and that is rampant even today going by manifold measurable socio-economic indicators. In the 21st centuries, the suffering from these inequalities has attained the level below acceptable human dignity in Nepal, while the contemporary knowledge-base has created much awareness to the value of human dignity increasingly to the unprecedented level globally.

In Nepal, highly stratified caste-based social structure is generally taken for granted in order to maintain a societal *status-quo* for centuries. Until the last quarter of the past century, the mainstream people in general were hardly cognizant of the fact that bottom segments of their population in the hierarchically stratified structure of the society were continuing to suffer heavily

and ever increasingly so from all the possible faces of oppression of the kind as described by Young (2000), resulting in manifold inequalities in the society.

My thoughts in early life were highly influenced by the teachings of my elders and my social background during my school days. I was taught by my elders to believe that there was some anomalous social hierarchy existing in Nepal. For much of my schooling days all the way to graduation with School Leaving Certificate (SLC) of Nepal, everyone in my school circle respected me for everything other than my caste background. Consequently, I was led to experience and internalize within myself a need for a `big` change to happen to overturn alarmingly increasing level of difficulties faced by the oppressed lot of the population in everyday life especially in the most marginalized segment of the society through to the end of the 20th century. The prevailing situation of inequalities needs fixing urgently such that we do not carry this suffering any further in the 21st century. But, it is so complex and deep rooted that there are no quick-fixes. Our strides for achieving the goal of removing inequalities borne of out of caste-based discrimination should be to responsibly contribute towards creating an equitable space for everyone in the society for all-round wellbeing of the people in the future, removing barriers of inequalities in living conditions, focusing on universal access to food, education and health as well as the overall wellbeing of the people.

Because, I grew up as a hill boy in a disadvantaged and marginalized family in Nepal, and spent later most of my professionally productive life in the Himalayan mountains and foothills, I have been keeping myself wary of the situation all along and across them. I have been always thinking that traditional values that have been the basis of discrimination and oppressions among people in Nepal must change radically. Fundamentally, the first thing to change is to remove the people's notion of "high" and "low" that is hovering in their mindset, taking it for granted. The change should occur to impact on the roots of the causes of discrimination. The main issue is about changing the *status quo* situation through the behavioural change in the mindset of the people. This change can happen in a two-pronged approach, from the general approach impacting the routine life of the people in general as well as specifically targeted approach to address the issues of the vulnerable "lows".

Accordingly, I have endeavoured to contribute to some strides towards bringing about small "changes" in various wide ranging issues in two pronged way- general and focused rather than any single way. My efforts were realized mostly through my collaboration with the stakeholders of the issue at hand as well as working with like-minded co-workers or colleagues.

I would like to narrate now three case-example stories that would represent the nature and extents of some of my strides made towards such "change" that would have additive effects on the socio-economic transformation and social justice, as I would have thought.

Case Story: Introducing High Grade Dairy Cows in Pokhara

In the mid-1980s, my posting as a District Veterinary Officer in charge of Livestock Development Program with the Government of Nepal was transferred from a Mid-western Terai district of Banke to Western mid-hill district of Kaski. As a new development agent, it was not difficult for me to notice some of various scenarios in the livestock system unique to Pokhara valley of Kaski district. One striking thing that caught my immediate attention was a recently installed state-of-the art dairy processing plant donated by Danish Government that was meant to supply the milk and dairy products to the residents of Pokhara and also supplement the supply to the ever growing demand in the capital city Kathmandu. The plant was already starting its milk collection from nearby villages for its processing, and it was rapidly expanding its milk collection

network to nearby districts as well. This was certainly viewed back then as a good thing for stimulating the local rural economy by injecting new cash-flow to the small-farmers' households through their milk sales. At the same time, it was startling to note that the collection system was drawing even the small quantity of milk available from small-farmers households that would otherwise be nourishing their children. Even then, the dairy plant was running far below its processing capacity. More importantly, the supply of milk was almost entirely dependent on low-yielding indigenous hill buffaloes. I had envisioned that there was no alternative to introducing high yielding exotic cows to fill the gaps in sustainable supply of milk to the processing plant feeding the dairy starved urban centres, while correcting its anomaly in the existing source of milk supply. However, it was not immediately known to me as to how this would be possibly accomplished. Then, after a few months of my envisioning it in my own mind, a group of what appeared to be elite farmers by the Nepalese farmers' standards suddenly came to me asking for a specific assistance. They represented a group self-declaring as SiPa Bikas Samiti, which, as I learned, was coined to have its double meaning both as Sipa (meaning Skills) Development Committee as well as Sigdel-Pariwar Bikas Samiti. The group had come to me with a demand for milking improved buffalo cows on government loan, which I flatly refused to make any recommendation for. Instead, I grabbed that momentum opportunity to convince them to take up my envisioned idea to adopt raising high grade cows of the kind, which they had never seen in their life by then. The farmers indeed had no knowledge of exactly what was at their stake, but they seemed to trust my words more than any thing. They were headed for a great risk of raising some large animals that eat more nutritious feeds, required more veterinary care and at the same time produced enormous amount of milk. There was a great risk of even death of those cows that could not acclimatize to the new environment of Pokhara valley. The farmers group simply followed the path that their change agent had advised, despite the fact that there was no approved program in place yet to support them. The end result was phenomenal success that would not have even been materialized if my immediate boss the then Director of Livestock Development in the region and my whole department had not fully supported my endeavour right from the get-go. Within a few months of my encounter with the farmers of this group, the first truck-load of high grade hefty "Black and White" cows imported from the bordering districts of India, yielding up to 40 litres of milk a day each, arrived at their homesteads. Modestly improved housing and factory mixed feeds with improved grasses and fodder replaced the traditional feeding system of large ruminants in their homesteads. Words of mouth about the new arrivals spread like a wild-fire not only within the district, but across the neighbouring districts of Gandaki zone. Regional and Zonal administrations endorsed the initiative to help us transform it soon into a regular government programs from the subsequent fiscal years. This changed the dairy map of Gandaki zone for ever! Despite many risks involved relating to government loan repayment, short supply of feeds and fodder, disease and even the possible threat of financial loss due to deaths of the cows, many farmers of Kaski, Syangja, Parbat and Tanahun, within a short span of time, acquired the high yielding cows which they had no past experience with. New type of heavily weighing imported cows started appearing in local streets and pastures on the sides of the roads and hill trails. It actually took the form of a movement for dairy development. The farmers' routines and their farming behaviours changed for ever, with the traditional notions and ways of doing farming business no longer holding good that were unlikely to turn the scenario into any "Udiyachaur Dudh Kaand"ⁱⁱ. I could see some changes in the attitude of the farmers towards doing agri-business as well. This, as I thought, was a change that would lead to a holistic change in their traditional values, some of which would be rooted to their notion of "highs" and "lows" that I mentioned to you earlier.

In other words, the dairy development initiative was a direct socio-economic intervention to farming communities of western hills of Nepal that was leading a new avenue to increase production and supply of milk to meet its ever growing demands in urban centres. The initiative was not intended to specifically serve the underserved marginalized segment of the society, but it

was a new developmental approach that would lead to a “change” for holistic socio-economic transformation. It was breaking a traditional value of relying on indigenous buffalo cow for milk and entering a new era of raising high yielding exotic cows (though some dairy improvement with locally crossbred cows was not a new thing in the area). This change would also lead to a chain of further changes in social behaviours. One such example was that a few innovative farmers were channelling the vast quantity of cow dung produced to a bio-gas plant for their household cooking gas. One particular farmer whom I knew was also adding the toilet discharge to the bio-gas plant, which would not have been otherwise thinkable for adoption in a traditional Brahmin family. Such change in social behaviours would be compatible to any change for social justice that would eventually benefit marginalized and oppressed segment in the society provided all the changes made in the traditional values are integrated keeping in mind the human dignity at all times. However, our own impact study of technologies such as crossbred cows introduced in a part of the western hills for a different context, about a decade later, showed that the adoption was significant across ethnic groups, and Dalits, who were categorized as occupational caste group in the study, rated among the lowest in adoption of crossbred cows in the western hills as a whole (Floyd et al., 2003), indicating that a generalized program per se would not reach the marginalized segment of the population at the expected level, requiring focused approach.

Case Story: Nepaldalitinфо Network

I would like to introduce now to you the significance of Nepaldalitinфо International Network that I founded in 2003 in collaboration with a few like-minded members of my community, which is still active and proving a success story. The network was an initiative specifically targeted to empower dalit segment of the population in Nepal through dissemination of the right information resources that are provided to the stakeholders of country’s dalit movement.

The network is comprising its three functional organs, one, the nepaldalitiinfo@yahoo.com group mail-list, two, the original website www.nepaldalitiinfo.20m.com and three, a blog type website www.nepaldalitiinfo.net. The group mail list has recorded to date about 700 members from Dalit intellectuals of Nepal and intellectuals friends of dalits from Nepal and abroad. The websites are recognized by academia globally and especially the libraries of various Universities in the United States for dalit related information resources for their researchers and students.

The main purpose of the network was to support Dalit movement of Nepal in defining and defending the rights and human dignity of Dalit people and their communities. I have been endeavouring to contribute to this network to bring all its members to a platform for making some strides towards empowering dalit communities and their liberation movement through providing them with a functioning network through exchange of information resources. In my discourse while moderating the network, I have been putting forward the following expressions in various forms:

"Dalits, the people of traditionally oppressed status in Nepal, have been discriminated in all affairs of their social lives for centuries, especially after the promulgation of Nepal’s Muluki Ain (Civil Code) by the then Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana in 1854 that divided the people of Nepal into two discrete segments, "Water acceptable" and "Water unacceptable". All those designated by Muluki Ain as "Water unacceptable" are the victims of the state led social injustice no less than any other present-day crime against humanity that must be apologized for, rectified permanently, and appropriately compensated by the state sooner than later through constitutional and/or legislative provisions. The compensation must be the basis for all benefits that the people of Dalit status deserve receiving from the state."

Here, I am referring to the people of Dalit community who are listed by the National Dalit Commission (NDC, 2009) under five groups from the hills and 22 groups from the Teraiⁱⁱⁱ.

I may have to make a brief mention of the problem with the statutory provisions in the modern Nepal. Reforming from the autocratic Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana's 1854 Civil Code, the Late King Mahendra promulgated a law known as Naya Muluki Ain (New Civil Code) of modern Nepal in 1963, in which there existed a legal provision through an article from the Civil Code, "Adalko (Of Decency): 10" (LANCAU Nepal, 2005) that protected the interest of so-called high caste Hindus, who would maintain the *status quo* in the society in the name of traditional religious rights to practice rituals in a discriminatory way. The article was amended in the 1990s still retaining the discriminatory rights in the private premises such as homes. With the recent enactment of a new law, "Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense and Punishment), 2068 (2011)", the article "Adalko 10a" article has now been repealed (NDC, 2011), removing any ambiguity around caste-based discrimination and untouchability and also strengthening the enforcement of this law, which was weak in the past.

For the past several years, the Nepal dalitinfo network has been discussing how the oppressed (Dalit) people of Nepal should be referred to as. However, there is still a lack of consensus arrived yet in understanding this concept among the stakeholders of dalit movement. Personally, I feel that the concept should have been very straight forward. It is that no person of any ethnicity or demographic group can be treated "high" or "low" by descent, no matter what names they bear. And, the circumstantial reality is that the status of certain group has been labelled "high" or "low" to perpetuate caste-discrimination and untouchability practices handed down from the historical past. The people of Dalit communities should then take note of themselves as "Dalits" only to reflect on their status handed down from the past historical wrong doings of the state, its machinery and the society, in order to define and defend their rights and rightful position in the society. Ahuti (2010) also asserts that the use of the name "Dalit" is appropriate, and it is not derogatory, as it is given by the oppressed Dalits themselves, not by the perpetrators of the caste discrimination and oppression.

It is only recently this year that the law, Caste-base Discrimination and Untouchability Act (Offense and Punishment) Act, 2011, has been enacted by the Constituent Assembly Legislature-Parliament rendering any act or intention of caste-based discrimination and untouchability committed by a citizen upon any other citizen, in both public and private premises, as punishable offense. Thus, the practice of caste discrimination and untouchability remained legally protected by the state for long time directly until 1963 and indirectly until recently. We are now in a situation, where Nepal, having it self-declared status as the Federal Democratic Republic, has a long overdue obligation to apologize and provide compensation to the victims of caste discrimination and untouchability that was enforced by the state for far too long in the history. This has been a major demand of the Nepal dalitinfo network right from its inception in 2003.

The other areas in which the Nepal dalitinfo network has been contributing significantly to dalit movement of Nepal are the following:

- Ever since the establishment of the multi-party system in Nepal in the post-1990 peoples' movement period, while dalit movement of Nepal was just beginning to gain some momentum, it had soon been highly fragmented into the dalit wings of various political parties. The Nepal dalitinfo has been endeavouring to integrate them to work on unison, by way of providing an equal space for all dalit organizations and groups on the basis of their common and most essential agenda for dalit movement.

- Dalits and friends of Dalits have been educated on continual basis on the history, current status, demands, historical achievements and ways forward of dalits and their movement in Nepal.
- Researchers and graduate students carrying out research on topics of Dalit issues have been facilitated with direct and indirect intellectual assistance provided to them in their research and documentation.
- Historical incidents that are favourable or unfavourable to dalit movement have been recorded.
- Heroes of Dalit communities and Dalit movement of Nepal have been recognized and celebrated so as to encourage them to contribute positively to the Dalit movement.

Some of the other issues at hand that the Nepaldalinfo network pursue are the question of dalit identity, demands of dalits defining their rights and defending them, the issue of the need for a legitimate national representative body of Dalits for an integrated and effective Dalit movement.

Case Story: Open University of Nepal Initiative

My own perception of the prevailing situation has been that only the students from the areas of urban residence, those born in relatively resourceful parents and those who can reach the colleges through their own academic excellence or earning meritorious scholarships can have access to higher education in Nepal. This leaves out a vast majority of the country's population without access to post-secondary education experience. Especially, the disadvantaged and marginalized groups such as women and *Dalits*, face grave hurdles to acquire access to higher education. Lack of educational access has deprived the rural and marginalized groups of opportunities to realize their full potential as citizens. Consequently, the larger society is not able to utilize the potential contribution of all citizens for socioeconomic development (Dhakal et al, 2010). An Open University of Nepal (OUN) initiative was conceptualized, following an assessment of its need by the original proponents including myself. The Non-Resident Nepalis (NRN) Association declared the initiative as its flagship project during the Diaspora's Houston regional conference in 2010. The original conceptual framework of the OUN initiative is described exhaustively elsewhere (Dhakal et al., 2010). Accordingly, a vision of open and distance learning institution with its preliminary business plan, academic development programs and infrastructure required has been proposed. By the end of the 5th Global NRN Conference in Kathmandu earlier this month, the initiative has achieved the status of an initiative committed by the Government of Nepal. The goal of the OUN is to remove traditional barriers to universal access to affordable, internationally accredited quality higher education.

The proposed OUN includes the following major objectives (Dhakal et al. 2010):

- To close the gap in higher education demand, currently unmet by the combined capacity of all the institutions, through open and distance mechanisms.
- To take tertiary education to the rural, remote, and marginalized people of Nepal, especially women and *Dalits* who are practically confined to the villages due to family obligations, social challenges and financial constraints.
- To provide opportunities for teachers and government employees who are unable to advance their education, skills and careers while living in rural and remote places, or to those who are unemployed.
- To provide a mechanism to continue education for the youth who take temporary or permanent employment in foreign countries.
- To advance a computer-based education to rural Nepal that relates to health, social systems, productivity, economic improvement, and sustainability disciplines.

The following inter-disciplinary subject areas are proposed as the initial academic programs of the OUN.

- Education, distance education and early childhood education,
- Health sciences, health administration and management,
- Engineering sciences, information, and technology,
- Planning, administration and management of rural economy and institutions,
- Agriculture, environment and sustainable development,
- Entrepreneurship, collaboration, and business development,
- Mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences and philosophy.

The Open University of Nepal initiative is not about launching yet one another school of higher learning in the scenario of contemporary competitions of establishing educational institutions in the country. It is intended to bring about social justice through removal of barriers of universal access to higher education that extends to reach out to the rural, remote and marginalized homesteads across the country.

The initiative has been conceived as an eventual means of transferring knowledge and innovation from the established academics and professionals among Nepali Diaspora around the world to Nepali people living particularly as the remote, rural and marginalized population in their motherland. The initiative aims at providing an opportunity to equalize the rampant socio-economic inequalities, through higher education that would be delivered in both general and focused target beneficiaries. These, I believe, are sure to bring desired “change” in the society.

Concluding Remarks

In order to realize the envisioned equitable space for the marginalized population, the manifold impacts of oppression and discrimination should be averted by a two-pronged approach—improving generalized social equality and focusing on compensatory empowerment of the oppressed lot. However, the generalized approach to serve the population as a whole such as the dairy development case-example was lacking a component of “inclusiveness” for serving the underserved marginalized segment of the society in the prevailing situation back in the 1980s. If the similar approach was to be adopted in the today’s era of inclusion, the marginalized segment would also need to be at the heart of such a program proposal. This is precisely the reason why the current initiative of Open University for Nepal incorporates the rural, remote and marginalized populations as its target beneficiaries in both general and focused ways.

In the case of specifically focussed initiative such as Nepaldalitinfo international network, it was started as an essential means to streamline the Dalit struggle for equality in the society. However, in order to make the strides universally accepted, it must follow non-partisan approach that is backed by a legitimate representative national organization such as National Assembly of Dalits that I have been advocating for a number of years now through the Nepaldalitinfo forum.

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End Notes:

ⁱ Development of My Thoughts, from Early in Life

My thoughts in early life were highly influenced by the teaching of my elders as well as my social background during my school days. I was taught by my elders with a notion that there was some anomalous social hierarchy existing in the society. For much of the schooling days all the way to graduation with School Leaving Certificate (SLC) of Nepal, everyone in my school circle respected me for everything other than my caste background.

When I reached my 2nd year University undergraduate class, I came to learn about a fascinating social hero of the yesteryears from the 19th century. He was Rudolf Virchow (1821- 1902), a German Physician, Father of Pathology, Anthropologist, Pre-historian, Biologist, Politician, Epidemiologist & Public health activist. The reason for my fascination for him right from the day I studied the history of pathology was not only because I obsessively liked to study pathology back then, but also for his particular contribution as a crusading social reformer. The spread of his work across disciplines has taught me a multi-disciplinary attitude in my thoughts in the ways I look at the things to consider even today.

ⁱⁱ The so called high caste milk farmers of Udiyachaur village in Syangja district refused to include Dalit families in the government organized milk collection cooperative. This scandalous incident of caste-discrimination and untouchability led to a Dalit struggle known as “Udiyachaur Dudh Kand”.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dalit class is officially defined by the National Dalit Commission of Nepal as the community of various caste people, who have been considered untouchable by caste discrimination in the society, and described by the Muluki Ain (Civil Code), B.S. 1910 (1854) based on Hindu Varnashram Caste System as “water unacceptable” and requiring purification and have been pushed backward (marginalized) from the mainstream of the state socially, economically, politically, educationally and religiously (NDC, 2009).