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## ENVISIONING AN EQUITABLE SPACE FOR MARGINALIZED PEOPLE IN NEPAL: A JOURNEY OF SMALL STRIDES THROUGH NOVEL IDEAS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

### INTRODUCTION

The continuing influence of outmoded feudal traditions on modern Nepal, of which the most onerous is the system of caste-based discrimination, has prevented large segment of the society from living lives of dignity and achieving their full potential as human beings. The Conference on Himalayan Studies, on the theme “Rethinking the Himalaya: The Indo-Tibetan Interface and Beyond” is an opportunity to examine this issue and discuss some of the ways in which it is being addressed.

In addressing you in this plenary session, I propose to share my thoughts with you through a journey around my own life experiences, starting from my early life to my career as a veterinary professional in public service in Nepal working in many districts, and then in my later life in the health and education fields serving the people of Nepal, Canada and beyond. However, the purpose of my talk is to share with you some examples of things I have done or been involved in that may have made a difference in the lives of the people, towards the ultimate goal of realizing forward looking “change” in the society as a whole, and for creating an equitable space for marginalized populations that would otherwise be left out from the mainstream of socio-economic life.

The inhabitants of the Himalayan region in general, and Nepali people in particular, have been able since time immemorial to make a living from the natural resources of their environment, provided they are judicious in its utilization. Unfortunately, ever since my childhood, I have seen gross negligence on the part of the 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 that a person would like to see “high” or “low” in every other person. The “highs” for example are the ruling class, elite class, landlords, 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 oppression of every kind (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”. The “Highs” dominated the utilization of resources, tangible or non-tangible, while the “lows” continued to be deprived of them. As a result of this situation, widespread inequalities exist among people according to their descent, and are rampant even today as evidenced by manifold measurable socio-economic indicators. In the twenty-first century, the suffering from these inequalities exceeds what is morally acceptable, while contemporary knowledge and education has increased awareness of the value of human dignity.

In Nepal, the highly stratified caste-based social structure has been taken for granted for centuries, maintaining a societal *status-quo*. 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 society were continuing to suffer heavily and increasingly from every kind of oppression, as described by Young (2000), resulting in manifold inequalities in the society.

I grew up as a hill boy in a disadvantaged and marginalized family in Nepal, and spent most of my

professionally productive life in the Himalayan mountains and foothills. My early life was greatly influenced by the teaching of my elders and my social background. I was taught by my elders that there was some anomalous social hierarchy existing in Nepal. For much of my schooling, all the way to graduation with the School Leaving Certificate (SLC), everyone in my school circle respected me for everything other than my caste background. Consequently, I could experience and internalize within myself a need for a “big” change to happen to overturn alarmingly increasing levels of difficulties faced by the oppressed in every-day life, especially in the most marginalized segment of the society throughout the twentieth century. The prevailing situation of inequalities needs fixing urgently so that we do not carry this suffering any further in the twenty-first century. But it is so complex and deep-rooted that there are no quick-fixes. To achieve the goal of removing inequalities borne of out of caste-based discrimination, we should seek to create an equitable space for everyone in the society, removing barriers of inequalities in living conditions, focusing on universal access to food, education and health, as well as on the overall wellbeing of the people.

Traditional values that have been the basis of discrimination and oppression among people in Nepal must change radically. Fundamental to this is to remove the people’s notion of “high” and “low” that is so firmly rooted in their values. Such a change would impact on the roots of the causes of discrimination. The main goal should be to change the *status quo* by changing the mindset of the people. This change can happen in a two-pronged way, the first by impacting the routine life of the people in general and the second through specifically targeted approaches to address the issues of the vulnerable “lows.” Accordingly, I have been striving to bring about small “changes” in various wide-ranging issues, in collaboration with others involved with those issues. I would like to narrate now three case stories of the steps I have taken towards bringing about the kind of change that would positively impact the direction of socio-economic transformation and social justice.

### **Case Story: Introducing High Grade Dairy Cows in Pokhara**

In the mid-1980s, as a District Veterinary Officer in charge of the Livestock Development Program of the Government of Nepal, I was transferred from the Mid-western Tarai district of Banke to the Western mid-hill district of Kaski. One striking thing that caught my immediate attention when I arrived in Pokhara was a recently installed state-of-the art dairy processing plant donated by the Danish Government that was meant to supply milk and dairy products to the residents of Pokhara city and also supplement the supply to the ever growing demand in the capital city Kathmandu. The plant was already starting milk collection from nearby villages for processing, and it was rapidly expanding its milk collection network to

nearby districts as well. This was certainly viewed 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 disturbing to note that the collection system was drawing on even the small quantity of milk available in small-farmer 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 supplying milk sustainably to the processing plant feeding the dairy starved urban centres. However, at that time, I did not know exactly how this would be accomplished. A few months later, a group of what appeared to be elite farmers by the standards of rural Nepal, came to me asking for specific assistance. They represented a group, belonging to the Sigdel clan of Kudhar in Pokhara, self-declaring as SiPa Bikas Samiti, which, as I learned, was coined to have a double meaning, both as Sipa (meaning Skills) Development Committee as well as Sigdel-Pariwar Bikas Samiti. (Sigdel Family Development Committee) The group had come to me to demand buffalo cows on government loan, which I flatly refused to recommend. Instead, I grabbed that opportunity to convince them to take up my idea to adopt high grade cows, which they had never seen in their life before. The farmers indeed had no knowledge of exactly what was at stake, but they seemed to trust my words. They were risking raising large animals that eat more nutritious feeds, required more veterinary care and at the same time produced enormous amounts of milk. There was a great risk of those cows dying if they 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 to support them. The end result was phenomenal success that would not have 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, each yielding up to 40 litres of milk a day, 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. Word of mouth about the new arrivals spread like wild-fire, not only within the district but across the neighbouring districts of the Gandaki zone. Regional and Zonal administrations soon endorsed the initiative to help us transform it into a regular government program. This changed the dairy map of Gandaki zone for ever! Despite many risks involved relating to government loan

repayment, short supply of feed 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 with which they had no past experience. This new type of imported cow started appearing in local streets and pastures on the sides of the roads and hill trails. It was indeed taking the form of a movement for dairy development. The farmers' routines and their farming behaviour changed forever, with the traditional notions and ways of farming no longer holding any good. 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 in their notion of "highs" and "lows" that I mentioned earlier.

In other words, the dairy development initiative was a direct socio-economic intervention in farming communities of the western hills of Nepal in order to increase production and supply of milk to meet the ever growing demand in urban centres. The initiative was not intended to specifically serve the underserved and marginalized segment of society, but it was a new developmental approach that would lead to "change" for holistic socio-economic transformation. It was breaking a traditional value of relying on indigenous buffalo cows 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 behavior. 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 innovative farmer 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 behaviour would be compatible with any change for social justice that would eventually benefit marginalized and oppressed segments of society, provided all the changes made in the traditional values are integrated, keeping in mind human dignity at all times. However, our own study of the impact 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, categorized as an occupational caste group in the study, rated among the lowest (Floyd et al., 2003), indicating that a generalized program *per se* would not necessarily reach the marginalized segment of the population at the expected level. It would require a focused approach.

### Case Story: Nepaldalitinfor Network

I would like to introduce now the significance of Nepaldalitinfor International Network that I founded in 2003, in collaboration with a few like-minded members

of my community. It is still thriving. The network was an initiative specifically targeted to empower the Dalit segment of the population in Nepal through dissemination of the right information resources to the stakeholders of country's Dalit movement.

The network is running with its three functional organs, one, a nepaldalitinfor@yahoo.com group mail-list, two, the original website www.nepaldalitinfor.20m.com and, three, a blog type website www.nepaldalitinfor.net. The group mail list has over 700 members, ranging from Dalit intellectuals of Nepal to friends of Dalits from Nepal and abroad. The websites are recognized by academia globally, and especially by various universities in the United States as the Dalit related information resource for their researchers and students.

The main purpose of the network was to support the Dalit movement of Nepal in defining and defending the rights and human dignity of Dalit people and their communities. I have been endeavouring, in this network, to bring all its members to a platform for making strides towards empowering Dalit communities and their liberation movement by providing them with a functioning network through which to exchange information. In moderating the network, I have been putting forward the following views 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 the Dalit community as listed by the National Dalit Commission (Pariyar and Bishwokarma, 2009) under five groups from the hills and 22 groups from the Tarai<sup>1</sup>.

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1. 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

Let me briefly mention the problem with the statutory provisions in Nepal. Reforming the autocratic Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana's 1854 Civil Code, the late King Mahendra promulgated a new *Muluki Ain* (New Civil Code) for post-Rana democratic Nepal in 1963. There existed in this new legislation a legal provision, through an article, "Adalko (Of Decency): 10" (LANCAU Nepal, 2005), that protected the interest of the so-called high caste Hindus, who would preserve the traditional religious right to practice rituals in a discriminatory way. The article was amended in the 1990s, although it still retained the right to discriminate in private premises such as homes. With the enactment of a new law, Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense and Punishment), 2068 B.S. (2011), the article "Adalko 10a" 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 Nepaldalitinfo network has been discussing how the oppressed (Dalit) people of Nepal should be referred to. However, there is still a lack of consensus arrived among the stakeholders of the Dalit movement in understanding the concept of term "Dalit" itself. Personally, I feel that the concept should have been very straightforward. It is that no person of any ethnicity or demographic group can be treated as "high" or "low" by descent, no matter what name they bear. The reality, however, is that the status of certain groups has been made high or low due to circumstances handed down from the past. The people of Dalit communities should refer to themselves as "Dalits", reflecting on their status handed down from the past historical wrongs of the state, its machinery and the society. Ahuti (2010) 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 that the law, Caste-base Discrimination and Untouchability (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 a punishable offense. Thus, the practice of caste discrimination and untouchability remained legally protected by the state until 1963, and indirectly until recently. This is a case where the state, now the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, must apologize for and provide compensation to the victims of caste discrimination and untouchability enforced by the state for so long. This

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(1854) based on the Hindu Varnashrama Caste System as "water unacceptable", who have been marginalized from the mainstream of the state socially, economically, politically, educationally and religiously (Pariyar and Bishwokarma, 2009).

has been a major demand of the nepaldalitinfo network from its inception in 2003. When the demand is fully met and discriminatory practices no longer exist in the society, the use of the term "Dalit" would, in turn, become pristine and sublime.

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

- Following the establishment of the multiparty system in Nepal after the 1990 peoples' movement, the Dalit movement of Nepal has been highly fragmented into the Dalit wings of various political parties. The Nepaldalitinfo network has been endeavouring to integrate them to work together, by providing an equal space for all Dalit organizations and groups on the basis of their common and most essential agenda for the Dalit movement.
- Dalits and friends of Dalits have been educated on a continual basis on the history, current status, demands, historical achievements and ways forward for 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 assistance provided to them in their research and documentation.
- Historical incidents that are favourable or unfavorable to the Dalit movement have been recorded.
- Heroes of Dalit communities and the 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 Nepaldalitinfo network is pursuing are the question of Dalit identity, issues of defining Dalit rights and defending them, the issue of the need for a legitimate national representative body of Dalits, and an integrated and effective Dalit movement.

### Case Story: Open University of Nepal Initiative

My own perception of the current situation in Nepal is that only the students from urban areas, those born to relatively resource-rich parents, and those who can reach the colleges through their own academic excellence or earning meritorious scholarships, have access to higher education in Nepal. This leaves a vast majority of the country's population without access to post-secondary education. Especially, disadvantaged and marginalized groups such as women and Dalits and the people of remote areas, face grave hurdles in acquiring higher education. Lack of educational access has deprived rural and marginalized groups of opportunities to realize their full potential as citizens. Further, the larger society is not able to utilize the potential contribution of all citizens for socioeconomic development (Dhakal et al,

2010). For this reason, an Open University of Nepal (OUN) was conceptualized, following an assessment of needs by the original proponents of the idea, including myself. The Non-Resident Nepalis (NRN) Association declared the OUN initiative as its flagship project during the Diaspora's Houston regional conference in 2010. Accordingly, a vision of management and administration of the institution with a preliminary business plan and academic development programs and infrastructure required has been proposed. By the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> Global NRN Conference in Kathmandu in 2011, the initiative had achieved the status of an initiative of the Government of Nepal.

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.

Traditionally, education in Nepal has been based on memorization of lessons and rote learning, borrowed from nineteenth century Britain and India. Conventional teaching has focussed more on theoretical principles and abstract concepts for learners seeking credentials, rather than their applications for building practical skills useful for real life. It is one of the overarching goals of the proposed OUN to transform the system of higher education from a credential model to a competency model. Moreover, in Nepal, most vocational and technical programs, like engineering and medicine, are generally affordable only to the rich and upper middle class. There is a serious gap in universal access to inexpensive, but internationally recognized, good quality education, particularly in technical skills-based fields (Dhakal et al. 2010).

A mechanism to deliver multi-disciplinary education can help graduates in the rural areas, and would produce civil, mechanical or electrical engineers, economists,

bankers, entrepreneurs, and environmental scientists to build critical rural capacity locally. For instance, the graduates of the proposed Open University should be able to team up and build a 10 Kilowatt power plant right where they live and work. Similar needs exist in the areas of health, agriculture, and natural sciences (Dhakal et al. 2010).

The following inter-disciplinary subjects are some of the potential academic programs of the OUN envisaged for its initial establishment:

- 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 another school of higher learning in the context of the contemporary competition to establish educational institutions or the commercialization of higher education rampant today in the country. It is intended to bring about social justice by removing barriers to universal access to higher education, and extending its reach to the rural, remote and marginalized people across the country.

The initiative has been conceived also as a way to transfer knowledge and innovation from the established academics and professionals among the Nepali Diaspora around the world to Nepali people, particularly those remote, rural and marginalized populations in their motherland.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In order to realize the envisioned equitable space for marginalized people, the manifold impacts of oppression and discrimination should be reversed by a two-pronged approach: improving generalized social equality and focusing on compensatory empowerment of the oppressed. However, the generalized approach to serving the population such as the dairy development case described above was lacking a component of "inclusiveness" for serving the underserved marginalized segment of the society in the prevailing situation in the 1980s. If a similar approach were to be adopted in today's era of inclusion, the marginalized 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 requires incorporating the rural, remote and marginalized

population as its target clientele.

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

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