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### The Emergence of Nepali Dalit Literature

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#### Abstract

The under-representation of Dalits in Nepali-language literature until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—both as the subjects of texts and the authors of texts—is very striking, and a category of Nepali-language writing labelled *dalit sahitya* only began to emerge after 1990. This paper report draws upon research on this issue conducted in 2021-22. First, it introduces a selection of Nepali-language texts produced by non-Dalits in which Dalit characters and Dalit-related issues have been portrayed. Most of these were published before Dalits began to author such texts themselves; a few are of more recent origin. It then offers a preliminary thematic summary of the Dalit-authored literature that has appeared in more recent years, and a summary of the debate that has arisen about the definition of *dalit sahitya* and the authoritative representation of Dalit issues in Nepali-language literature.

**Keywords:** Dalits, Nepali literature, Nepali Dalit literature, caste system, caste-based oppression

#### Introduction

कस्ता भइसक्यौं हामी तिमिले पाखा नफालेको भए ?

कहाँ पुगी सक्यौं हामी तिमिले उपेक्षा नगरेको भए ?

What would we have become if you had not cast us to the margin?

How far would we have gone if you had not disregarded us?

(Jawahar Roka, ‘Kasta Bhasakthyaum Hami?’)

When we consider that the history of writing in Nepali begins in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the near total absence of Dalits from this literature until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—whether

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as the subjects of stories, poems, novels, essays etc., or as the authors of such texts—is very striking.<sup>1</sup> In his account of the development of Dalit aesthetics and literature, Ninu Chapagain describes this exclusion of the Dalit from ‘traditional’ Nepali literature in the following terms:

‘Everybody knows that the caste system, which regarded the Dalits as untouchable (*asprishya*), has not only outcasted (*bahishkar*) them from society and religion, but also banned them from acquiring knowledge (*jnana*). It has deprived them of religious sacraments (*sanskar*), prohibited them from performing *puja* in temples. Efforts have been made to prevent them from acquiring wealth. They have been forced to live outside the villages. In such circumstances it is absolutely true that the *sanskar*, life, modes of religious practice (*upasna paddhati*) and arts and literature of the Dalit community could not be included in the imagination or standards of traditional literature.’ (Chapagain, 2070, p. 99).<sup>2</sup>

Until men such as TR Bishwakarma and Jawahar Roka began to publish their writings in the late 1950s and early 1960s, *all* references to Dalits in published Nepali language literature, and to Dalit-related issues such as untouchability, caste-based oppression and discrimination (which featured in Nepali writings only rarely before the 1990s, in any case) came from the minds and pens of writers who were not Dalits themselves. Over the nearly 60 years that have elapsed since then, we have moved from a situation in which the only accounts of the realities of Dalit existence were a tiny number of texts produced by writers from the dominant castes, to a situation in which a growing number of Dalit writers are finding their voices and beginning to influence, if not control, the narrative.

### **Dalit Consciousness**

It is possible to discern in the literary treatment of the Nepali Dalit over this time period a progression from what Brueck calls ‘narratives of pity and condescension and fetishization’ to texts that display at least a measure of *dalit chetna* [Dalit consciousness] (Brueck 2014:14, 15), especially from the point in time when writers from the Dalit communities begin to appear in print. In India, recourse is regularly made to the concept of Dalit consciousness as the essential ingredient of *dalit sahitya* (Dalit literature), and Brueck seems to believe that non-Dalit writers are not capable of it:

Non-Dalit writers, however sympathetic, use the Dalit character as an object of empathic connection and subsequently locate the impetus for social change

- 1 For a powerful piece of rhetoric on this absence, see Sundas 2070 b.s.: 49.
- 2 All translations from Nepali are my own.

*outside* of that Dalit object, Dalit writers instead seek to invest their characters with subjectivity and the power to resist, rebel, and change. This is Dalit consciousness. (Brueck, 2014, pp. 14-15)

Although the term *dalit chetana* is increasingly embedded in the Nepali discourse, the situation in Nepal appears to be more inclusive than it is in India, with most analysts defining ‘Dalit literature’ as a body of writing authored by both Dalits *and* non-Dalits that focuses on the Dalit condition and opposes the caste system. Ninu Chapagain perceives not only ‘casteist’ (*jatiyavadi*) thought and narrowmindedness but also ‘cultural tyranny’ (*sanskritik tanashahi*) in the argument that only literature written by Dalits is valid as Dalit literature. He argues that if the same restriction were to be applied to all other genres, the circle of Dalit writers would become very small, surrounded by a wall like that which surrounds the ‘Brahmanist society’ (*brahmanvadi samaj*) (2070, pp. 76-82). Aahuti (Bishwa Bhakta Dulal), who is Nepal’s most prominent and influential Dalit literary figure, has also defined Dalit literature in ideological terms: not as literature written *about* Dalits, or even *by* Dalits, but as ‘literature that is written in opposition to the caste system’, arguing that it would be wrong to insist that only literature written by Dalits can be accepted as Dalit literature, because this ‘pushes all oppressed literature into endless splits and divisions, and... denies that all genres of creative art are recreations of experience’:

Just as proletarian literature is not just literature for the proletariat, but rather literature that teaches the whole human community how to look at the world and society in a proletarian way, so too Dalit literature is not merely of or for Dalits, but is rather literature that makes the whole of society recognise the need to uproot the caste system... (Aahuti, 2077).

However, total unanimity does not exist on this matter. Padam Sundas, for instance, mentions only writers from Dalit backgrounds in his important essay ‘Dalit sahityako nalekhieko itihās’ [The Unwritten History of Dalit Literature (Sundas, 2070)]. I explored this question in one-to-one conversations with twenty Dalit writers in Kathmandu in May 2022. All of my interviewees endorsed the concept of a Dalit literature that is written by both Dalit and non-Dalit authors. In their view, the defining feature of this literature was *pratirodh*, ‘resistance’, and specifically Dalit resistance to caste-based oppression and discrimination. There seemed to be a consensus among them that if a text does not resist or oppose the caste system, whether explicitly (for instance, by narrating a particular rebellion) or implicitly (for instance, by extolling the aesthetic value of Dalit skills, labour and art), then it does not contain Dalit consciousness and does not qualify as Dalit literature. Narrating the sorrows of a victim of caste-based oppression and discrimination does not in itself qualify a text as

Dalit literature if the narration does not have resistance at its core and does not hold out the prospect of Dalit liberation.

## Results and Discussion

### Nepali Dalit Literature: An Historical Outline

Authors of literary histories often feel obliged to impose some kind of periodisation upon them. The only book-length study of Nepali Dalit literature to appear to date, Barali and Adhikari's *Nepali Dalit Sahityalekhanko Itihas* (2077 b.s.) adopts a structure that is based upon political, social and literary developments in Nepal. Pre-1953 is designated a 'background phase' (*prishthabhumi charan*), during which there were no Dalit writers, and Dalits and Dalit issues featured only in a very small number of texts, all authored by non-Dalits. This 'background phase' is followed by a 'first phase' which begins with the publication of Muktinath Timilsina's novel *Ko Achut?* in 1954. This first phase lasts until the end of the Panchayat period in 1990, and sees the emergence of the first handful of Dalit writers. The 'second phase' begins with the re-establishment of multi-party democracy, and ends with the negotiated settlement which brought the Maoist 'People's War' to an end in 2006. The first of these developments ushered in a new atmosphere of political and cultural freedom, the second enabled a much more vigorous assertion of minority rights. The period saw the emergence of the first substantial generation of school-educated Nepali Dalits, and a significant increase in the quantity of Dalit literary and media production. The 'third phase' begins in 2006 and is still ongoing; it does not appear to me to be qualitatively different from the 'second phase'.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The 'Background' Phase*

It is regularly asserted that the first attested examples of resistance to practices of untouchability in Nepali society are found in the pre-modern writings of the Joshmani *sampradaya*; Chapagain, for instance, cites Sant Shashidhar (1804-1906 v.s.) and Dildas (1878-1940 v.s.) as particular examples. He sees Yogmaya as being in continuity with these (Chapagain 2070 b.s.: 60), but, as I have argued elsewhere, Yogmaya's *banis* actually have little to say about caste-based discrimination (see Hutt 2013). The Nepali Dalits' political

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3 It is important to stress that Nepal's Dalits are a group of people who share the basis for their oppression but are otherwise heterogenous. The overarching term *dalit*, which is still resisted by some, does not appear in Nepali-language discourse until the late 1980s. Even in India, although Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar first appropriated the term in the early decades of the twentieth century, it did not really begin to be used widely as an identity-marker until the 1970s, with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers (Mukherjee 2007: 12).

movement is usually dated back to the rebellion against Brahmanical oppression led by Bhagat Sarvajit Bishwakarma in the 1940s (Barali 2070 b.s.)

Two of Nepali literature's most iconic poets—Lakshmi Prasad Devkota (a Brahman) and Siddhicharan Shrestha (a Newar)—were probably the first 20<sup>th</sup>-century Nepali writers to criticise the traditions and practices of untouchability. Most famously, when the male hero of Devkota's classic narrative poem *Muna-Madan* (1936) falls sick with cholera on his return journey to Kathmandu from Lhasa, he is taken in and nursed back to health by a 'Bhote'. Although the 'Bhote' is not a Dalit as such, he is a member of an ethnic/social category that has historically been regarded as essentially unclean by the dominant Hindu castes, and the episode occasions the following oft-quoted verse:

This son of a Kshetri touches your feet,  
But he touches them not with contempt,  
A man must be judged by the size of his heart,  
Not from his name or his caste.

Deeply influenced by the English Romantic poets, and particularly by Wordsworth, many of Devkota's shorter poems are expositions of the essential goodness of humble, marginalised people; a handful of them focus on Dalits specifically. In the lyric 'Chamar' the sweepers sing of their 'tears of servitude' (*seva bhavka ansu*) and express their devotion to a deity who is a 'friend of the poor'. The poem 'Ek Sundari Chyaminiprati' is addressed to a 'beautiful Chyamini' who is praised for having 'washed [away] untouchability and cleansed the age'. 'Chamar Sundari' tells the story of a Brahman youth who abandons his caste to marry Chameli, the beautiful girl who comes to sweep his family's courtyard each morning. In these last two poems the quality of Dalitness is feminised, the poet's gaze is inflected by male desire, and the morality of according a subordinated social status to Dalits in general is questioned, again implicitly, through an exposition of the spiritual and physical beauty of a female Dalit subject. A somewhat more radical tone is discernible in some later poems in which Dalits are mentioned only by inference; for instance, in 'Matribhumiko Mato Runcha' [The Soil of the Motherland Weeps (composition date unknown)].

A similarly radical tone is audible in the poetry of Siddhicharan Shrestha, the Newar poet now revered as the *yugakavi*, a near contemporary of Devkota who drew upon many of the same sources of inspiration. For instance, in Shrestha's poem 'Achut' ('Untouchable', composed in 1955) a deity addresses an individual who observes traditional caste rules on untouchability and ritual purity. This person has brought offerings to a temple in order to perform a puja, but the deity within the temple informs him that his offerings will remain

unacceptable for as long as he continues to treat others as ritually impure and untouchable.

Dalit characters play a subsidiary, but very interesting, role in *Paralko Ago* [*Fire of Straw*], by Guruprasad Mainali, one of the oldest and most popular Nepali short stories, first published in about 1937. The purpose of the story appears to have been largely to amuse its readers by inverting norms and stereotypes: a higher-caste man swallowing his pride to beg his wife to come home; a Dalit woman scolding a higher-caste man for mistreating his wife; a Dalit couple living a life of ritual purity and religious observance. But, like much early 20<sup>th</sup> century South Asian fiction (and Tagore and Premchand are surely influences here), the story also imparts some reformist messages: men should not abuse their wives; Dalits are also capable of virtuous behaviour.

### ***The 'First Phase'***

The displacement of the Rana family autocracy in 1950-1 and the promise (only briefly fulfilled) of multi-party democracy gave rise to an atmosphere of greater freedom. In my conversations with Dalit writers and scholars I have frequently been advised to read the novel *Ko Achut?* [Who is Untouchable?] by Muktinath Timilsina, a Bahun from Kaski district, which was published in 1954/5 (2011 B.S.) and banned by the government of the day. Barali and Adhikari state that it 'played an historic role in the field of the expression and presentation of Dalit consciousness not only in the literature of this phase but of all [Dalit] literature (2077 B.S., p.105)

*Ko Achut?* is a rather breathless 100-page novel, in which secret identities are revealed and historic wrongs exposed. As well as describing the social conditions which Nepal's Dalits were forced to endure, the novel also depicts lines being drawn between 'touchable' and 'untouchable' in dishonest and immoral ways. Although he emphasises the significance of this novel, the Dalit scholar and critic Ranendra Barali also points to some of the less than credible aspects of its plot (Barali 2074 B.S., p.18). The lavish descriptions of Gore and Ujeli's physical beauty, which is taken as a sign that they are not Damais by birth, for example, betray an aesthetic conception of Dalitness that is at odds with the perceived central thrust of the book. None the less, the novel contains passages that struck me as distinctly modern in their content and tone.

Balkrishna Sama, a disaffected Rana who adopted the pen-name Sama [Equal] and is lauded as Nepal's first great playwright, published the epic poem *Chiso Chulo* [Cold Hearth], the story of an unfulfilled love affair between a man named 'Sante Damai' and 'Gauri', a Chetri woman, in 1958/9 (2015 B.S.) Chapagain praises the sympathy shown by Sama for a widow woman and a Dalit man but complains that Sama does not bring them into conversation with one another, and that the Damai character's long philosophical

ruminations are wholly unrealistic (2070 B.S., p.64). Barali and Adhikari give Sama some credit for being the first to adopt a Dalit character as the main protagonist of an epic poem (*mahakavya*) but are otherwise unimpressed by the book's prevailing tone of *daya* [pity] (2077 B.S., p.102).

In 1960, King Mahendra ended Nepal's brief period of parliamentary democracy, and the constitution he promulgated in 1962 ushered in a new political system, the Panchayat, which lasted until 1990. The revised version of the national legal code that was introduced in 1963 rendered caste-based discrimination illegal, but this had little effect on daily practices across Nepal. In a poem entitled 'Lahure Sarki', Kevalpure Kisan mocked those who believed that the new Muluki Ain would abolish untouchability. The new dispensation also made it much more difficult for Nepalis to advance or pursue sectional interests.

The Dalit writers Jawahar Roka, TR Bishwakarma and Padam Sundas appeared during the early Panchayat period. Jawahar Roka, who was active from the mid-1950s (his earliest writings appeared in a handwritten journal from Chainpur), published twelve short stories between 1963 and 1980, along with three volumes of verse and a novel. While Padam Sundas believes that TR Bishwakarma was the first Nepali Dalit to write Dalit literature, citing his poetry collection *Banchne Thulo* (2017 B.S.), Suwal gives the title of 'first Nepali Dalit writer' to Jawahar Roka.

Padam Sundas himself has been prominent in Nepal's Dalit movement for decades, serving as the founding chair of Samata Foundation, and also recently as Nepal's ambassador to Bahrain. He published *Choriyeke Raat*, a collection of stories, in 1965, and his poems 'Tyo Yuvak' published in the Royal Nepal Academy's *Himani* journal in 1964 and 'Mero Kabita' (1993) are poignant articulations of an educated Dalit's frustrations.

The Panchayat years saw the establishment of a Nepali literary canon which was propagated through the national education system, and which ignored these first stirrings of Dalit literary activity. The texts that were granted a place in the canon were enshrined in anthologies of poetry and fiction published by the state-funded publisher Sajha Prakashan and the then Royal Nepal Academy. None of these books gave space to even one Dalit writer, and Dalit characters and Dalit-related issues were central to only one of the texts included in their pages. This is the short story 'Hali' by Krishnabam Malla (b. 1920/1), a Thakuri from western Nepal, which appears in the anthology *Sajha Katha*, first published in 1968/9 (2025 B.S.) The story recounts the exploitation and oppression suffered by 'Pudke Damai', whose name proclaims both his Damai identity and his short physical stature. The situation of dependence described in the story is the archetypal rural Dalit condition that has been



described by anthropologists such as Mary Cameron (2007).

Parijat's short story/essay 'Naikape Sarkini', first published in 1982/3 (2039 B.S.), is regularly cited as a key literary text on the Nepali Dalit from this period (see Luitel 2003, pp.78-9; Gurung 2019). It is an extremely bleak description of the daily life of a female member of the urban underclass, for whom there is nothing but the daily grind of labour and the demands of a disabled husband who offers her no solace of any kind. The story's only specific reference to the Dalit condition is in its title 'The Naikape Sarkini', Naikape being a town quarter of Kathmandu. The fact that the character Parijat is describing is a Dalit is not central to the story, reflecting once more the Nepali Marxist perception that class provides a better basis for political analysis and mobilisation than caste.

### ***The 'Second Phase'***

The Jan Andolan of 1989-90 persuaded King Birendra to dismantle the 28-year-old Panchayat system and give his blessing to the re-establishment of multi-party parliamentary democracy. A new constitution was promulgated in 1990, followed by general elections in 1991. A gathering of writers and musicians convened by Jawahar Roka established a Dalit Sahitya Akademi in 1992, and the Nepali Dalit Sahitya tatha Sanskriti Pratisthan [Dalit Literature and Culture Academy] was established four years later with Padam Sundas as its chair. One of the earliest signs of an opening up of mainstream Nepali literary culture in this changed political context was the establishment of the prose-literature quarterly journal *Samkalin Sahitya*, edited from and published by the [Royal] Nepal Academy. This included not only works written originally in Nepali, but also Nepali translations of works originally written in other languages of Nepal. However, I have been able to detect only one Dalit name (that of Mahendra Malangia) among those published in *Samkalin Sahitya* during the journal's first twelve years. It is impossible to say to what extent, if any, Dalit *characters* or Dalit-related *content* feature in the material published in *Samakalin Sahitya* without reading every issue from cover to cover, but in general, only one of these texts (*Sinu* by Ganesh Rasik)<sup>4</sup> gives any hint of Dalit-related content in its title.

One story with Dalit content that has become comparatively well known is Dhruba Sapkota's *Chitkar* [The Scream], probably because the English translation by Ann Hunkins (Hunkins 2017, pp.149-56) has been republished twice. The story focuses on the Badi community, and its purpose seems to be to paint a picture of a community, and specifically its women, that is condemned to eke out its survival by performing a function, sex work, that is prescribed to it by the rest of society, and from which it cannot escape.

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*Junkiriko Sangit*, a lengthy (p.453) novel by the leading Left writer Khagendra  
4 *Samkalin Sahitya* 11.1: 61-4.



Sangraula published in 1999/2000 (2056 B.S.), is both important and controversial. It charts the emergence and growth of political consciousness in a Dalit community and the evolution of the relationship between these Dalits and their dominant-caste neighbours in a village in Parbat district. Sangraula paints a picture of extreme oppression. The Dalits are entirely dependent upon their local dominant-caste patrons, and have no agency at all until an NGO named Aphno Khuttama Aphai Ubhium [Let Us Stand On Our Own Feet] comes to their village and helps the Dalits to understand their predicament. Sangraula's message is that there is a need for unity among the disparate Dalit castes and communities and a need for direct action by them. However, the book came under severe ideological attack from Maoist critics.<sup>5</sup> Sangraula's chief crime in their eyes was to cast a pair of NGO workers in the role of raisers of consciousness. For the Nepali Maoists, who claimed this role for themselves and saw NGOs as revisionist lackeys of the capitalist west, this was anathema.

Shrawan Mukarung's celebrated poem 'Bise Nagarchiko Bayan' [The Testimony of Bise Nagarchi] draws upon one of the recurring themes of Dalit-authored poetry—the presence of Dalits throughout the course of Nepali history and the unacknowledged contributions they have made to that history—to articulate resistance to King Gyanendra's attempts to subvert Nepali democracy. In August 2005 he recited the poem for the first time to a theatre audience in Kathmandu, after which it was widely circulated and printed. According to Aditya Adhikari, Bise's testimony symbolized 'the radical change in the consciousness of Nepal's marginalized people' (Adhikari 2014, p.189).

Mukarung's poem can also perhaps be seen to mark the final entry of unmitigated Dalit consciousness into the Nepali-language literature written by non-Dalits. This may have been, at least in part, a consequence of the small but growing presence and audibility of the Dalit voice in cultural and political discourse in post-1990 Nepal. This presence has taken the form of, *inter alia*, Dalit magazines and journals, broadcast media programmes (notably, Aahuti's *Dalan* teleseries, broadcast in 2008, and *Jaatko Prashna*, a TV talk show hosted by the actor Rajesh Hamal from 2020), Dalit-authored op-eds in leading Nepali-language print and online media; and literature, particularly poetry, steeped in Dalit consciousness, by individual Dalit writers. These trends continue into Barali's and Adhikari's 'third phase', with a number of Dalit writers bringing out collections of their writings. This phase has also seen the first instances of Dalit-led activism in the literary field, with a case being brought to the Supreme Court to counter what were perceived to be harmfully stereotypical depictions

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5 One Dalit writer told me that because there were very few Dalit writers at the time, and the level of awareness was low, many Dalits were very happy with Sangraula's *Junkiriko Sangit* when it was first published, because they had at least been represented in it.

of women from the Badi community (Gautam, 2075 B.S., Nepali, 2078 B.S.)

### Contemporary Dalit-authored Literature: Some Writers and Themes

Most of the current generation of published Nepal Dalit writers, which probably consists of no more than a few dozen people, emerged after the democratic changes of the 1990s, and particularly since the conclusion of the Maoist civil war. Most of the Dalit writers I have met to date are the offspring of illiterate parents, and all but one are hill Dalits. Although most are men, and many are Bishwakarmas, there are several noted women Dalit writers, and writers from other castes too: for instance, Pancha Kumari Pariyar became the first woman Dalit writer to be published by Sajha Prakashan in 2013. These writers generally know one another, or know of one another. Facebook is important to them: many poems are published first on the poet's homepage, then widely shared among the writers who are their FB friends. In some cases, this is the only place these texts can be found.

Poetry is the dominant genre, but there are several Dalit writers of fiction. There is a general consensus among these writers that something called 'Dalit literature' does exist, and that it has certain distinctive features. But most of them have only a simple or literal sense of what a separate Dalit aesthetics might be. Chapagai's insistence on the need for it to be revolutionary in a strictly Marxist political sense in order to qualify as Dalit literature does not seem to be the consensus view, although the default political orientation is certainly towards the Left.

Aahuti looms large over the scene; his political influence is significant, and many Dalit writers are members of his Baigyanik Samajvadi Communist Party, founded in 2018. Aahuti began to publish poems in progressive literary journals in the early 1990s, and his first collection, *Tapasvika Githaru*, was published in 1992/3 (2049 B.S.), followed by two novels and a monograph on the caste system in Nepal. Not all of Aahuti's writing is concerned with Dalits or Dalit-related issues; in fact, the majority of his early poems assert the right to justice of *all* of Nepal's oppressed and marginalised people, and are more concerned with the class struggle than with caste *per se*. However, his monograph on caste and class in Nepal, *Nepalma Varna Vyavastha ra Varga-Sangharsha*, contains two poems that tackle the issue of caste and Dalitness very powerfully. The first of them, 'Gahungoro Africa', first published in 1994, has become a key text of Dalit literature.

The *Aafar* anthology, published by the Samata Foundation in 2016/7 (2073 B.S.), is also highly significant. This contains 32 poems by eight poets, calling themselves the *Unmukta Pusta*. All of the poems in this anthology are concerned with Dalits and Dalit-related issues. A brief introduction explains the purpose of the anthology as follows:

‘Something or other must surely have been written on the basis of Dalit aesthetics in the history of Nepali literature. But the reality that stands before us is that they have not been able to write in a coordinated (*sangathit*) manner and have not been able to make an effective intervention in society. With *Aafar*, the Unmukta Pusta has begun coordinated writing in opposition to discrimination. This will certainly make a kind of intervention against traditional writing. The poems included in *Aafar* are not merely free of traditional writing style and images, they also make a merciless (*nirmam*) assault upon them. It is our firm belief that the poems in this anthology will not only help to raise Dalit aesthetics to new heights, but also the whole of Nepali literature.’

Surprisingly, all of the poets are men, and only two of them (Kewal Binabi and Harisharan Pariyar) come from Dalit backgrounds.<sup>6</sup>

I will end this paper with a brief discussion not of individual writers and texts but of some of the thematic areas I have identified in the course of my readings to date.

In relation to **gender**, Pancha Kumari Pariyar stated in her interview with Muna Gurung (2019), ‘when I read Parijat’s ‘Naikape Sarkini’, I suddenly realised that not only was I Dalit and therefore one of the lowest people in society, but I was also a Dalit woman...’ Her 2013 collection, entitled *Juthi*, was written explicitly for a female Dalit readership, and many of her poems address issues arising from this crucial intersectionality

**The unacknowledged presence of Dalits** as players in the major events of Nepal’s national history is a recurrent theme in Nepali writing about Dalit issues. Mukarung’s Bise Nagarchi poem is probably the most celebrated example, but there are many poems written by Dalit poets that treat cognate themes, for instance Dhanbahadur BK’s poem ‘Itihas Hera’ [Look at History] is a chronological recitation of political changes at national level in Nepal, from the fall of the Ranas to the 1990 Jan Andolan, with the Dalits as mere bystanders, and Dhana Kumari Sunar’s poem, ‘Malai Chinna Sakenau’ is a poignant articulation of her community’s political invisibility.

Pari Vikram, a young poet who publishes his poems on social media, identifies **Dalithood as an honourable, achieved status** by contrasting it with Brahminhood, which is conferred simply by birth. Damaihood is something that must be earned by mastering a particular set of skills: playing music at a wedding, sewing clothes, forging a plough, cutting up a dead buffalo, etc.<sup>7</sup>

6 Since the appearance of this anthology, Binabi and Pariyar have each published their own collection of poems (Binabi, 2078, Pariyar, 2079).

7 See Pari Vikram ‘Ma Damai Bhaisakeko Chaina’ on <https://www.see-pari.com/>

Ranendra Barali's short story 'Dalitko Dailo', [The Dalit's Door],<sup>8</sup> deals with themes of **resentment and politicisation**, as does Roka's story 'Warrant' and a number of other stories. In Barali's story, Kailey Kami carves a beautiful wooden image of Shiva, which becomes the centrepiece of a new temple beside the Narayani River. However, when he goes to worship at the temple on the holy day of Shivaratri he is beaten up for trying to enter it.

Many Dalit-authored poems reflect on **generational change and continuity**. Kewal Binabi's poem 'ChoiDum' is named after a children's game of tag in which a child becomes a Dalit if he/she is touched by a chaser, and the winner is the last one to escape the chaser's polluting touch. Now the speaker in the poem has become a father himself, and he finds his daughter playing the same game and asking him the same questions he asked his father. Bikram Pariyar's 'Sutekaharulai Badhai' sarcastically congratulates the Dalits who sleep on and refuse to awake, and still live as if it is the 16th century. Harisharan Pariyar's poem 'Pasinako Hisab', addressed to his father on his funeral pyre, tells him to rise up: a new weapon must be forged from his bones, the Bishtas must be made to stand up in the dock and offer a proper reckoning of his ancestors' sweat.

Several of Harisharan Pariyar's poems harness **the symbolism of particular physical attributes of Dalithood**. Scissors have been used by generations of the poet's forebears to create clothing, the national flag, and to 'cover society's shame', but he fears that they will become 'inhumane' and cut the human image, fingers, hands and even the national flag.<sup>9</sup> As a Damai, the speaker has played the shenai 'with these untouchable fingers' many times to 'fill up your happinesses, to weep your sadnesses, to make you dance', but today he discovers that he tunes he has played 'could never touch your heart, could never join us together in a relationship'.

Mahendra Malangia's story 'Samudra Manthan'<sup>10</sup> and Kewal Binabi's poem 'Shudra Shambuka' are examples of **reworkings of mythology**. In the first, a man relates to his nephew the myth of the gods churning the ocean; the contest between the gods and *rakshashas* over who would hold onto the head of Sheshnag; and how the *rakshashas* lost this contest and the gods secured all of the nectar for themselves. The author relates this myth to the treatment of members of his caste, a Madhesi Dalit caste called the Khatbe, at

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Pari Vikram 'Ma Damai Bhaisakeko Chaina' on [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz\\_v4ssOlp8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz_v4ssOlp8).

8 La-Lit vol. 8 Literature from the Margins, pp. 120-5.

9 by Harisharan Pariyar, La-Lit vol. 8 Literature from the Margins, pp. 129-30.

10 *Samakalin Sahitya* 20, (2052), translated from Maithili. (An English translation of this story appeared in La-Lit vol. 8 *Literature from the Margins*, pp. 39-48.)

the funeral rites of a high-caste patron. Binabi's poem is a monologue uttered by Shambuka, addressed to the Hindu deity Rama. The poem assumes the reader's familiarity with an episode from the *Uttarakhanda* of Valmiki's *Ramayana* epic, in which Lord Rama cuts off the head of a Shudra for the crime of practising penances, which are supposed to be the exclusive preserve of the Brahman priest.

Instances of **outrages committed against Nepali Dalits** by members of the dominant castes and reported in the Nepali news media, ranging from murder and rape to denials of basic rights, provoke literary responses from both Dalit and non-Dalit writers, particularly on social media. The murder of Navraj BK and five of his friends on the banks of the Bheri river in May 2020 inspired a flurry of powerful Dalit-authored poems, including Asmita Badi's 'Mero Pani Hatya Gariyos' [May I Too Be Murdered] and Hira Nepali's 'Bheri Kinara' [Banks of the Bheri], while Dalit journalists wrote op-eds such as Dhan Kumari Sunar's 'Rukum nar sanharle dieko sandesh' [The message of the Rukum murders] (*Annapurna Post* 23 Jeth, 2077 B.S.).

Finally, the often tragic theme of **intercaste love** has inspired several novels (eg., Saroj Dilu's *Abhishapta Swarharu* (2062 b.s.) and Jawahar Roka's *Suvasko Sindur* (2048 B.S.)), stories and poems.

### Conclusion

Dalit literature is written by both Dalits and non-Dalits. It is the content of this literature, not its authorship, which will determine whether or not it is accepted as Dalit literature by those who pass judgement on such matters. Many Dalit writers have drawn great inspiration from non-Dalit writers and, as Ninu Chapagai remarks, 'There is a long chain of poetry from Siddhicharan Shrestha via Parijat to Dhan Kumari Sunar and Pancha Kumari Pariyar' (2070 B.S.: 64); the poet and essayist Modnath Prashrit is another great inspiration for many.

And of course, it is not necessarily the case that just because an individual writer comes from a Dalit background they will produce Dalit literature: there are a number of writers, Dalits by caste, who write on a range of different topics and themes. However, I believe that the development of Dalit consciousness in Nepali-language literature is a direct consequence of the fact that Dalit writers are finding a voice. This voice is not merely a corrective. It also brings a new dimension to writing in Nepali, offering profoundly new perspectives, even on a mundane verb such as *chunu*, 'to touch':

*To touch.*

*To touch is to be the beginning of creation;*

*If it had not been touched by some scorching comet,  
How would such a beautiful earth have been invented?  
When a seed touches the womb of the earth,  
It becomes a seedling, attractive and beautiful.*

*When the hoe digs and delves  
And touches the infertile land,  
Nature smiles as it is decorated in greenery,  
As it descends to the churning of the arid ground.*

*When one thought touches another,  
There is born in the conclusion  
An undying philosophy of life,  
With an understanding of duty.*

*When day touches night,  
All across the globe there spreads light and nothing but light.*

*To touch – it is discovery,  
To touch – it is the uprooting of darkness too.*

(Krishna Biswokarma, छुनु 'To Touch')

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