

RELIGION OR POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS? REVISITING DOR BAHADUR BISTA'S *FATALISM AND DEVELOPMENT* THESIS

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First published in 1991 and reprinted several times subsequently, well-known Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista's *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization* (F&D, henceforth) is probably the most cited and talked about publication on the Nepali state and society.¹ Cambridge anthropologist Alan Macfarlane (1990) has acclaimed that the contribution of the book is comparable to Western classics such as Weber's *Protestant Ethic* and Tocqueville's *Ancient Society*. Others have criticized it for its ambitious generalizations and paucity of evidence (e.g., Dahal 1990; Sharma 1991; Malla 1992; Pahari 1992; Metz 1996; Mishra 2016). Yet, the book continues to intrigue and inform social scientists and development practitioners interested in Nepal.² The unabated popularity and discussion of the book prompted this revisit nearly twenty-five years after its first publication.

The book covers Nepal's development efforts from the end of the Rana regime in 1951 to the late 1980s. F&D can thus be read as a critique of development policy and practices during the monarchical Panchayat period

¹ Dor Bahadur Bista, also known as the father of Nepali anthropology (Fisher 1996: 349), mysteriously disappeared in 1996 from western Nepal. See KC and Onta (2013) for a brief biography and a list of his publications.

² The popularity and importance of the book in Nepal is further demonstrated by the fact that a conference on the book was jointly organized by Tribhuvan University, Martin Chautari, and South Asian University in Kathmandu in December 2016. An early version of this paper was presented at the conference. According to the conference participants, F&D has long been a "required reading" for newly arrived expatriates and foreign development experts in Nepal (see also KC and Kharel 2017). One reviewer of this paper was of the opinion that Manjushree Thapa has probably replaced Bista as the most popular author in the contemporary expatriate circle in Kathmandu. I explore the reception of F&D in a separate paper.

(1960–1990). Reminiscent of the debate about Hinduism and economic development in India in the 1960s and 1970s (Singer 1966, 1972), in F&D, Bista argues that members of the “high-caste”³ ruling elite are influenced and guided by Hindu values and that the same elite is responsible for Nepal’s failure to modernize itself and for its degeneration into the present state of backwardness from that of a prosperous and proud country. As I elaborate later, by high-caste Hindu values, also termed “Bahunism” and “Bahunistic values” in the book, Bista means a constellation of worldview and behavior—fatalism, *āphno mānche* (one’s own people) and *cākarī* (sycophancy).⁴ Based on this diagnosis, he suggests that Nepal resort to its *productive* indigenous cultural values for its economic development and modernization. He sees an active role and guidance of monarchy in the process.⁵

In this paper, while putting the book in the context of broader intellectual tradition and his other major publications, I agree with the previous reviewers (Dahal 1990; Sharma 1991; Malla 1992; Pahari 1992; Metz 1996; Mishra 2016) that the book’s primary thesis, judged from the perspective of conventional social sciences, is problematic, and in the process I also bring out several issues overlooked by Bista’s previous readers. I argue that he exaggerates the claim of his originality since he was profoundly influenced by the modernization school of development and the “idealist” school of caste theory. In addition, Bista overlooks previous publications on similar topics in Nepal. He fails to demonstrate the causal power of the Bahunist values. Nor does he succeed in identifying the historical actors at the central political and bureaucratic institutions who allegedly carried the said values. Finally, drawing on works of historians, I agree with Bista that some elements of the said Bahunist values did exist—and they still do—but I locate Bahunist

³ Bista, at times, uses the term “high caste” to refer to Bahuns; on other occasions, he includes the Chhetris, Thakuris, and Shrestha Newars in the Bahun category. Other terms he uses to depict the groups include Bahun-Chhetris, immigrant Bahuns, higher castes, upper caste, and the highest caste. Unless otherwise stated, by “Bahunists” I mean the high-caste ruling elite from these groups.

⁴ Many scholars and ethnic activists have attributed the now popular Nepali term for Bahunism, *Bāhunbād*, to Bista (Williams 2016). As discussed below, it is less problematic to define *Bāhunbād* as a description and depiction of the political domination of the high-caste elite in Nepal. But in this paper, I contest that the said elite are governed or guided by the Hindu values or *Bāhunbād* in a straightforward way.

⁵ Monarchy was abolished in Nepal in 2008.

actors and the persistence of the values in the political institutions, not in the Hindu religious texts, values and practices. In particular, I point out that the political culture and institutions that originated in and were buttressed by the Shah courts in the eighteenth century and that flourished during the Rana and Panchayat periods better account for the presence and persistence of Bahunist actors as well as the said values.

Fatalism and Development: An Original Contribution?

Bista refrains from identifying F&D with one intellectual tradition or another. Instead, he tries to establish his work as an original contribution. A careful reading, however, suggests otherwise. I show that Bista's work can be identified within the "idealist" school of caste theory and the modernization tradition in development sociology and anthropology.

In Western academia, modernization theory took center stage after World War II (Gusfield 1967; Bernstein 1971; Singer 1972; Eisenstadt 1974). The central problematic of the theory had been the sharp boundary between tradition (the East) and modernity (the West) and how to transplant Western values, institutions and achievement orientation in the Third World countries so that they too could move up the ladder of modernity. In Nepal, the early works of historian and scholar Rishikesh Shaha (1975) can be put under this tradition, and a large number of rising educated intelligentsia and political elite endorsed this view. Consequently, "development" and catching up with the West became the themes of the period (Adhikary 1996). Beginning in the early 1970s, Marxist theorists started challenging the major tenets of the modernization theory (Frank 1970; Booth 1985). Understandably, in this tradition, class relations and "unequal geographies" informed analysis and diagnosis of problems of development and underdevelopment. In Nepal, both Nepali and foreign scholars produced a number of works drawing on Marxist tradition in the 1980s (e.g., Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1980; Seddon 1987; Mishra 2007).

Another important influence during the period was German sociologist Max Weber. Two strands of his political and economic theories became influential in Western academia. The first came via American sociologist Talcott Parsons and his functionalism school into the modernization theory, which I indicated above. By the early 1970s, another line of thought emerged out of Weber's works, focusing on conflict, *interest* and *domination* rather than consensual values, institutions and norms. Weber's typology of

“patrimony” and “patrimonial bureaucracy” became popular in the study of premodern states as well as societies in “transition” (Roth 1968; Blake 1979; Rudolph and Rudolph 1979; Theobald 1982; Hamilton 1990; Lai 2015).

In Nepal, the works of historians Mahesh Chandra Regmi (1976, 1978, 1995) and Ludwig Stiller (1976, 1995[1973]) can be read as the second strand of Weberian thought. Regmi and Stiller have shown how the ruling high-caste elite under the Shah monarchs—“patrimonial bureaucracy”—abused the peasantry and used the state to amass power, wealth and prestige. In this interpretation, the ceaseless pursuit of wealth and power guides the behavior of Nepali high-caste elite. In his later works, Shaha (1990a) explicitly invoked the idea of “patrimonialism” to explain Nepal’s development problems during the Panchayat period. I will discuss this theme later.

Bista’s treatment of these works in F&D is rather awkward. He lists two books by Regmi and three by Stiller in the bibliography, but he never cites them in the main text.⁶ Shaha’s major works, which address the same issues as Bista’s do, are entirely missing. In F&D, there are hardly any abusive kings, regents, civil functionaries, military officers, landlords, or usurers who exploit tenants and farmers. Unlike other reviewers of the book (e.g., Macfarlane 1990), my reading is that Bista only hesitantly discusses the issues of corruption and abuses by the elite during the Panchayat regime, as these “materialist” concerns derail his Bahunist values thesis.⁷

In Chapter 2, it is easy for readers to misread Bista’s elaborate discussion of the caste system. Here, Bista argues that the Indian model is not much helpful in understanding the Nepali caste system. By Indian model, he means the theory of Indian society powerfully advanced by the French anthropologist Louis Dumont (1980), which posits that the structural principle of purity and pollution is the key to understanding the caste system

⁶ Bista cites Stiller’s relatively less important work (1968). See also footnote 29.

⁷ There is no entry for the term “corruption” in the index of the book. Bista first describes corruption in the context of Hindu worldview, claiming that Hindu society glorifies poverty and that prosperity is understood as a form of corruption (1991: 79). Next, he describes corruption as a manifestation of *cākarī* (1991: 92–93). Finally, he discusses corruption as embezzlement of state funds, mainly foreign aids (1991: 147). Of note, Bista here misses the contradiction between the said glorification of poverty and embezzlement of state funds by the elite.

and Indian society in general.⁸ Bista (1991: 29) argues that “[t]hough Nepal is considered to have long been Hindu, its native Hinduism has not included a belief in caste principles, which remain a foreign importation with little popular support. ... Though [the caste system] supported by a minority of the populace, it is very important minority...” Stressing the uniqueness of the Nepali caste system, he further adds, “This [Puranic] worldview is insensitive to historical factors outside the general ambit of the Puranic tradition and overlooks both the late arrival of the fatalistic caste system and its relatively tenuous position within Nepali culture” (Bista 1991: 30). He essentially argues that the caste system in Nepal is weak and different from that in India despite the Bahunist efforts to impose it on the people since the fourteenth century (see also Bista 1970).⁹ He also notes that modernization has further eroded the basis of the caste system and that class is becoming the major axis of division in society.¹⁰

Despite the efforts to distance himself from the Indian model, Bista’s debt to the “idealist” school of Dumont is more than apparent. Just like Dumont, who famously claimed that the “sociocentric” stratification model, developed in the West, was “unsuitable” for studying the Indian Hindu society, Bista observes:

Attempts by most scholars to understand and then represent Nepali society, especially the dynamics of the predominant Nepali culture, have typically been burdened by a theoretical framework, used for the study of social stratification, developed by a Western mentality that attempts to represent Hindu caste society either based on the

⁸ Bista cites “Dumont, (1970)” on page 36, where he contests the latter’s theory of caste, but he does not list this work in the bibliography. According to one reviewer of this paper, the reference could be the first English edition of *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*.

⁹ Bista does note that the caste system was introduced in the Kathmandu Valley during the Lichchhavi period (1991: 20). He probably assumes that the early caste system may not have been as bad as it later came to be under the influence of immigrant Bahuns who came with an “excessive concern for self-preservation” and caste purity (1991: 39).

¹⁰ Bista (1991: 50) characterizes the changing nature of the caste system in the conservative Tarai in this way: “...decreasing economic dependence forebodes a social and political independence as well, so that the future of the caste system in this area is increasingly in doubt.”

Indian model or as a periphery of the western centres of industrial capitalism and imperialism (Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon 1980). Nepal is not like India. This is a critical point. And an overemphasis on the structural qualities of caste often simply obscures more critical issues concerning value systems. (Bista 1991: 8)

Having characterized the social stratification model as a “Western mentality” and having distanced himself from the Indian model, Bista then names his contribution an “intracultural approach,” which he defines as “the study of Hindu society [that] permits valid generalization, even while such societies are being subjected to change and therefore going through a period of disorder” (1991: 7). Like Dumont, Bista then wants to generalize his thesis that is based on the values to the whole Nepali society, ignoring politics, economy, heterogeneity, change and idiosyncrasies throughout the society.

Dumont takes wealth and power head on by separating and subordinating them to status, even if his approach has been summarily criticized (e.g., Berreman 1971; Heesterman 1971; Singer 1971). Bista, on the other hand, does not have a theory of power. In an ironic move, he classifies caste groups in Nepal based on political and economic power (1991: 43, diagram 3) and states that the model is “viewed by majority and practiced by all.”¹¹ In his zeal for the intracultural approach, he tries hard to banish politics and economics into oblivion. As I indicated above, he entirely ignores previous Nepali publications that deal with power and politics. He also neglects extensive published literature from India on the interaction between caste, class and power (e.g., Dirks 1989a, 1989b; Srinivas 1995; Béteille 1996[1965]).¹² Dumont’s generative structural principle (purity and pollution) produces the caste system in both theory and practice. However, for Bista, since he assumes that the caste system affects the social life of a “tiny minority” in Nepal, the caste question poses an unusual problem. The purity in Dumont’s purity-pollution dichotomy mysteriously becomes Bahunist *values*, and

¹¹ He also posits that the primary caste division in Nepal is between clean and water-unacceptable castes. As one reviewer of this paper pointed out, many others have taken a similar position (Basnet 2015, 2016). But if Bista had followed through this argument, he would have reached a different conclusion.

¹² Bista makes passing remarks on the 1854 legal code and local Chhetri rulers who helped Bahuns spread caste ideals and fatalism (e.g., 1991: 4, 46), but he returns to his core concern, i.e., the Bahunist values, without delving into the political arena.

the pollution pole is missing or underemphasized.¹³ Having struggled to represent the Nepali caste system this way, Bista treats the Bahunist values as a causal force that affects the worldview and behavior of the high-caste ruling elite, which eventually results in poor policy judgment and Nepal's underdevelopment.

Unlike Dumont (1980), Bista wants to go beyond intellectualism by criticizing and advocating change in the Nepali state and society as he saw it in the 1980s. He claims that socio-cultural and religious values have rarely been used to explain development in Nepal (Bista 1991: 8). He, however, roundly exaggerates his originality claim (see also Mishra 2016). As indicated above, all the major concerns that Bista raises in F&D, including family, religion, *cākārī* and *āphno mānche*, were addressed by Shaha (1975, 1990a) a good number of years before the publication of F&D.¹⁴ If one replaces Bista's ruling Bahunists for Shaha's modernizing elite and monarchy, little is left for Bista to describe and explain. Macfarlane (1990) cites several authors who might have influenced Bista.

In the imagination of modernization theorists, religious beliefs, "superstitions," and rituals fall on the side of tradition in the modern-tradition dichotomy (Gusfield 1967; Bernstein 1971; Singer 1972; Eisenstadt 1974). The modern-tradition dichotomy frequently appear in Bista's previous works. In his novel *Sotālā*, he posits the tradition-modern dichotomy as the central theme (Basnet 2017). In his *Report from Lhasa*, based on his observation of the Tibetan society while positioned there as the Consulate General in 1972–1975, Bista is almost celebratory about traditional Buddhism being dismantled and replaced by "modern" Maoism while the statues of the Buddha in Tibet stood "witness to history" (Bista 1979: 34). In F&D, when it comes to religion, he only concedes some room for the "widespread practice" of "clan deities" (Bista 1991: 158).

¹³ By removing pollution from the dichotomy, Bista deprives himself of the underlying logic and internal ordering of the caste system that Dumont (1980) eloquently describes. Once the caste holism is done away with, Bista's Bahuns float freely carrying the Bahunist values. They are individualists but not like those of Tocqueville's "responsible" Americans (1991: 95, 97). Bahunist individualism eventually degenerates into *āphno mānche*.

¹⁴ It is ironic that Bista does not cite or list Shaha's 1975 and 1990 books. The first edition of Shaha's 1990 book appeared in 1982. Kamal P. Malla and Prayag Raj Sharma had also used some of the concepts used by Bista before he made them popular (KC and Kharel 2017).

Although he never engages the concepts, the terms modernization and development in the title of the book are not accidental. It is not difficult to see that by development and modernization Bista means what Nepal lacks and what the West, Japan and, to some extent, the East Asia have achieved—high economic growth, higher per capita income and high level of consumption. Throughout the book, he appreciates the West for their “progressive” values, competitive spirits and motivations for achievement. He almost regrets that Nepal missed out on the “positive legacies” of European colonialism such as modern education, bureaucracy and infrastructure (Bista 1991: 28, 134).¹⁵ He largely endorses the roles of international actors, claiming that “[i]nternational interests in Nepal are not always of a political nature. There is a larger altruistic element, and this element does aim to work in Nepal’s best interests” (1991: 141). But he carefully avoids the fact that the international actors have their share of blame for Nepal’s underdevelopment, political instability and structural inequality (Mishra 2007; Tamang 2012; see also Rose 1971 on this theme).

Having dismissed Nepal’s constraints in manufacturing and production that had been the main concerns of the political economic approaches (e.g., Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1980; Seddon 1987; Mishra 2007), he advocates trade as the surest road to Nepal’s prosperity. He appreciates the rising tide of market, which only intensified in South Asia after the publication of the book. Reminiscent of a famous passage in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, he appreciates the Nepali “people’s natural inclination” toward trades and commerce (1991: 160). He admires Nepal’s past that extensively traded with both Tibet and India. Bista, however, does not see the need to transplant Western values in Nepal; he finds them already present in some ethnic groups. F&D can thus be termed as the “second phase” of modernization scholarship (Singer 1966).¹⁶ His Nepali model, then, is a

¹⁵ Bista is not alone in praising the roles of European colonizers in modernizing their colonies. The well-known Nepali scholar Kamal Prakash Malla (1979) also held similar views.

¹⁶ Bista lists two books by Weber—*The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*—in his bibliography but does not cite them in the main text. He leaves out Weber’s major works that focus on the religions of South Asia. Some reviewers see a direct connection between Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* and F&D (e.g., Dahal 1990; Macfarlane 1990; Malla 1992; Kamata 1999), but Bista

mixture of Parsons-inspired modernization theory and Dumont's theory of caste and inherits all the problems associated with the theories.¹⁷

The Bahunist Values

What are the Bahunist values and their consequences for the Nepali state and society? For Bista, as I noted above, religion in abstract is the supreme traditional force and the Bahunist values come from the Hindu religion.¹⁸ The most important of the values is fatalism, which is the feeling “that one has no personal control over one's life circumstances, which are determined through a divine or powerful external agency” (1991: 4).¹⁹ Fatalism is “based essentially in the Puranas, which heavily emphasizes fatalism through its stress on karmic determination...” (Bista 1991: 58, footnote 2). Next comes the practice of *āphno mānche*. This practice too comes from the Hindu religious beliefs and practice of dependency on God. Bista maintains that Nepali culture, in general, is “collectivist,” which is good, but collectivism among the high-caste groups manifests itself into a pathetic form of *āphno mānche*. He derives the third concept *cākari* from fatalism and *āphno mānche*. But again, for Bista, religion is the key: “The origin of *chakari* (sycophancy) lies in religious ritual practices of obeisance, which was extended to the governing classes and then to all in certain positions of power” (Bista 1991: 5). Thus, according to Bista, the Hindu high-caste governing class suffers from this malaise. The values eventually manifest in a range of attitudes, orientations and behaviors, including self-confidence, motivation, sense of time, planning and the idea of causality (Bista 1991: 4,

does not articulate the connection in the text. See Giddens (1976), Gellner (1982), and MacKinnon (1988a, 1988b) for controversies surrounding Weber's *Protestant Ethic* thesis.

¹⁷ Bista must have drawn on his vast experience with the Nepali state and society (Bista 1958, 2004[1967], 1968, 1971, 1976a, 1976b; Fisher 1996; KC and Onta 2013), but his references to concrete cases and examples are scant in the book. Notably, Bista does not engage in any kind of sustained debate against any Nepali or foreign scholar. When he does, he is usually dismissive, thereby making F&D largely a monologue.

¹⁸ Bista frequently mentions Puranas and Dharmashastras without specifically naming any text. The texts that were named include *Manusmriti*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, and *Bhagavad Gita*.

¹⁹ According to Giri (2016), the concept of fatalism is a colonial construct, and it was widely used in European oriental discourse.

see also Chapter 4).²⁰ Bahunism, particularly in its manifestation of fatalism, results in poor policy judgment, which, in turn, affects Nepal's quest for modernization and development.

For Bista, the values are such a powerful force that he finds a direct causal link between this value system and major historical events such as the demise of the Khas Empire²¹ in western Nepal in the sixteenth century (1991: 26) and the successful Gorkhali conquest of modern Nepal (1991: 45). He observes that the power of the values is so overwhelming that even those who have returned after living abroad and are supposedly trained in non-Bahunist values succumb to it (1991: 138). In Chapter 6, he describes how several efforts to implement “productive” education, championed by the late King Birendra, met with failure because of noncooperation from the Bahunists. He laments that the Bahunist values have turned education into something to show off rather than a means for productive (manual) labor. In Chapter 7, he argues that some high-level bureaucrats uncritically oppose foreign aid because they believe in the idea that the development of the universe is *cyclical* and spontaneous (Bista 1991: 135). On the other extreme are those who take foreigners and foreign aid as paternal dependency, which is an offshoot of the Bahunist values. Socialization, together with university education, teaches high-caste planners and bureaucrats to indulge in punditry and abstract issues rather than focus on concrete problems and planning (Bista 1991: 54, see also Chapter 7). As a result, foreign aid has become ineffective. In the end, the Bahunist values, operating through the Bahunists at major decision-making institutions, create havoc on the Nepali state, society and its aspiration for development and modernization.

An examination of the Bahunist values—fatalism, *āphno mānche* and *cākarī*—however, shows that Bista errs in their sources as well as their causal effect. He derives the behavior of Bahunist actors from some unnamed Brahmanical religious texts (Puranas and Dharmashastras) in a straightforward way.²² But he does not offer a single piece of contextual

²⁰ On a positive note, Bista argues that the same fatalism has given Nepali ruling elite a sense of equanimity that helped maintain Nepal's sovereignty.

²¹ Some historians might agree with the view that the caste system was responsible for the demise of the Khas Empire, but they also point to generous land grants to Bahuns, compounded by internal squabbling, rather than the Bahunist values *per se* (Pradhan 1991).

²² Bista does not tell his readers if the texts he refers to were actually circulated. He treats the texts as if they reflected the then existing society and as if the beliefs and

observation to back up his claim that the said values have produced the effects he criticizes. Bista (1976a) did find some sort of Bahunist values in a village in the southern plains in the 1970s. But F&D is not about the southern plains or Bahun priests in the villages; it rather deals with those at the central political and bureaucratic institutions in Kathmandu.

More importantly, he seems to be unaware of contradictory goals and motivations embedded in his thesis. According to Bista, fatalism is primarily about beliefs in insurmountable external forces, which paralyzes individual motivation and efforts by giving rise to the feeling of resignation. *Cākarī* and *āphno mānche*, on the other hand, mean effort and self-initiative to make worldly and materialist gains. Bista never clarifies how these seemingly contradictory Bahunist impulses can be reconciled (see also Pahari 1992). As I will discuss later, this contradiction could have alerted Bista to a different explanation, but he misses the opportunity.

Regarding materialistic gains, citing a survey in Chitwan in central Nepal, for example, Bista notes that the Bahuns were the “unhappiest” of all the groups in Nepal (1991: 72). Are the Bahuns unhappy because they have historically been more “acquisitive” than the other groups in Nepal? Nepali society, indeed, has stereotypical images of materialistic Bahuns—*jatā guliyo utai Bāhun bhuliyo* (where there is a sweet there is a Bahun). Malla (1992: 23) notes, “If any section of Nepali society has perfectly internalized ‘the Protestant capitalist work ethic’ and its accompanying cult of acquisitive success, it is the Bahuns.” After all, there is no dearth of materialistic philosophies, and examples of acquisitive Brahmins, in traditional Hinduism in South Asia (Berreman 1971; Singer 1972; Gellner 1982; Doniger 2009). By comparison, as a few recent studies have also shown (Guneratne 1996; Rai 2015), ethnic groups such as the Tharus in Chitwan and the Dhimals in eastern Nepal had been less acquisitive even in the twentieth century.²³

Neither does Bista investigate the popular conceptions of fate and karma. Hindus (and Buddhists) in Nepal and South Asia do frequently invoke these

values described in them dictated people’s actual behavior. He also neglects the fact that different versions of the same text with multiple interpretations existed throughout the Indian subcontinent (Doniger 2009).

²³ The issue of Bahun acquisitiveness—and other groups’ non-acquisitiveness—should be understood historically and sociologically, such as through their literacy advantage, familiarity with the market and private property, connection with the state, state land policy, and migratory experience.

ideas (Singer 1972), and recent studies have shown that ordinary Nepalis also use the concepts to explain life events (Basnet 2016). Singer (1966) has reported cases of Indian Brahmans who held similar fatalist values and beliefs that Bista presents as problematic within the context of Nepal, yet Singer's respondents were successful traders and industrialists. He argues that many people used fatalism and karmic theory to explain conditions but not their individual will and that others used fatalism to explain failure but not their success. Gellner (1982) notes that karma and *saṃsār* have not been important in the Hindu life in South Asia.²⁴ Many proverbs and popular sayings such as *bhāgyamā cha bhandaimā ḍokomā dūdh aḍidaina* (you cannot hold milk in a bamboo basket even if you are lucky) and *bhāgyale dine karmale thehne* (you are lucky, but your actions are holding you back) reconcile fatalistic attitudes and the importance of individual effort. Nor does Bista consider the possibility of fatalism and karmic theory as a justifying ideology for materialist motives and structural inequality.²⁵

It is noteworthy that fatalism is present in many world religions. The doctrine of karma, renunciation and reincarnation, shared by both popular Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, is an obvious case in point. Several exemplary Asian countries that Bista cites approvingly are influenced by the same beliefs and texts that he finds problematic in Nepal; neither is the contemporary West free from fatalism.²⁶ In fact, contradicting himself that the Hindu religion is the source of fatalism, Bista *rightly* tells his readers that fatalism “might be part of the universal human condition” (1991: 82). If fatalism is universal, then this key element of Bista's thesis is clearly problematic as a causal force that spawns underdevelopment and poor policy judgment in Nepal.

²⁴ In his novel *Sotālā*, Bista narrates, perhaps unwittingly, how religion does not come in the way of success of Kathmandu Newar traders (Basnet 2017).

²⁵ Marx and his followers have long argued that Protestantism was a justifying ideology for the rising capitalist class in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Western Europe.

²⁶ According to *The Washington Post*, an opinion poll in 2015 showed that 52 percent of Americans believe in fate while only 29 percent do not. Similarly, a whopping 30 percent believe that a zodiac star sign “can tell something about yourself or another person.” See www.washingtonpost.com/news/2015/jul/13/poll-61-percent-republicans-believe-fate-horosocop/; accessed August 13, 2016.

The other two constituents of the Bahunist values, *āphno mānche* and *cākari*, are equally problematic in that they too are not unique to Hinduism and high-caste elite in Nepal. In fact, these practices are universal, and many premodern states had developed variants of *āphno mānche* and *cākari* throughout human history.²⁷ Macfarlane (1990: 26) finds them in Rome and Versailles under “despotic rulers.” He also notes that *cākari* and *āphno mānche* is present in Mediterranean, South American, Indian and other societies. Nor are these “patrimonial” practices and tendencies absent in modern Western democracies or in atheist communist regimes (Roth 1968; Rudolph and Rudolph 1979). Similarly, religious obedience is not unique to the Hindu religion and is widely practiced in all the major world and indigenous religions. The widespread practice of *cākari* and *āphno mānche* in different contexts, times and places clearly shows that the practices may or may not have anything to do with religious beliefs, a theme I address later in the paper.

Finally, his chapter on the family life and socialization describes the social (re)production of the Bahunist values. He notes that children of high-caste groups are socialized into the Bahunist values, which crystallize into their psychology and personality. These values are thus transferred from generation to generation and from place to place with the ever-migrating and influential Bahunists. Unfortunately again, he does not show how the socialization process among the Bahuns in Nepal is uniquely different from the rest of the Nepalis. Macfarlane (1990: 29) notes that the socialization practices among Bahuns and different ethnic groups in Nepal are not different. Dahal (1990) states that Bista’s chapter on family and socialization is plainly misleading. Most importantly, from the perspective of this paper, he does not examine the upbringing of those Bahunists who actually run the central institutions in Kathmandu. Nor does he engage the controversial literature on the relationships between socialization, values and adult behavior.²⁸

²⁷ Bista does acknowledge the existence of *cākari* during the Rana regime (1846–1951), but he ignores it since he wants to avoid politics and returns to the question of Hindu values (1991: 102).

²⁸ Social scientists have long argued that the connections between socialization, personality, enduring values, beliefs, attitudes, and action are not straightforward (see, e.g., DiRenzo 1977; Swidler 1986; Ajzen 1987; DiMaggio 1997; Hitlin and Piliavin 2004). Bista notes in passing but does not integrate sociohistorical influences, mass media, peer pressure, and cohort and generational differences into his analytic core.

Who are the Historical Bahunists?

Bista not only fails to demonstrate the causal power of the Bahunist values on the high-caste elite behavior but also fails to identify the historical Bahunist actors at the central institutions. As a result, the readers of F&D keep wondering who actually the Bahunists are. Bista's descriptions of Bahunists in the book succeeds only to confuse the readers. According to Bista, the vast majority of the Nepali Bahuns are like any other hardworking Nepalis. He cautions not all Bahuns (who bear Bahun family names) are fugitives from the south; some of them were "promoted," for example, from among the Khasa Shamans in western Nepal. Bista (1991: 32) notes, "So there is no difference between a Bahun or a Dhami-Shaman officiating. It further appears that many ambitious Khas Dhamis (Shamans) adopted Bahun caste status and continued their priestly role..." Moreover, the original (?) Nepali Bahuns in different locations had not been as bad as the contemporary Bahunists at the central institutions have been. The Bahuns in the course of their migration were forced to *modify* their lifestyle to become "more pragmatic and future-oriented, and less fatalistic" and that "it has become almost impossible to find an orthodox Bahun in the entire Mechi zone" (Bista 1991: 51). He appreciates the Bahuns from around the Gorkha region in the central hills in the eighteenth century for allegedly abandoning the Bahunist values, becoming "entrepreneurs" and "progressive," and even joining the army under Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal (Bista 1991: 45).²⁹

He is less enthusiastic about the southern Madhesis or Maithil Brahmins.³⁰ At any rate, they were hardly influential at the central institutions during the Panchayat regime. But the Kathmandu Newars, who also practice the caste system, pose an unusual problem to Bista. He appreciates the Newars, who allegedly relinquished sacred threads for alcohol and buffalo meat, for resisting the Bahunization of their society (Bista 1991: 40). He appreciates the "hardworking" castes such as the Jyapus, but a few family names, such as the "Rajput Shresthas," are an anathema for Bista (1991: 164, footnote 2; see also p. 154). The Newar puzzle, however, deepens when considering

²⁹ Stiller (1995[1973]: 73), however, states, "Prithvi Narayan Shah does not seem to have wanted Brahmins to serve in his armies." Ironically, Shah took inspiration for his conquest from astrologers (Stiller 1968).

³⁰ Maithil Brahmins did play crucial roles in formulating the fourteenth and nineteenth century caste-based legal and social codes in Nepal (Höfer 2004[1979]; Pradhan 1991).

the fact that they were a “subjugated” people and that a rigid caste system was introduced in the Kathmandu valley in the fourteenth century. Yet, they have continued to remain an affluent and influential group, as Bista’s own account shows. Once again, Bista is silent on how and why the Bahunist Newars prospered and made inroads into the central political institutions in Kathmandu.

Shaha (1990a: 16) reports that more than 80 percent of the positions of power and profit in Nepal were held by high-caste groups in the 1970s. He further notes that more than half of the government civil servants came from the Kathmandu Valley itself. Gyawali (1994: 13) similarly notes, “By one count, 52 Chief District Officers out of the country’s 75 were Sanskritists.”³¹ The numbers given by Gyawali and Shaha tend to support Bista’s claims of Bahunists being influenced by the Hindu religious texts. But we run the same risk here—the problem of a link between text, meaning and behavior. Nor do Gyawali and Shaha offer any biographical information on the said officers. The problem of geography also becomes puzzling here. The data mentioned by Shaha shows that a great majority of the high-level bureaucrats and influential politicians during the Panchayat regime came from the central and eastern regions. However, by Bista’s own account, the hold of the Bahunist values is the weakest in these regions, as I described above. Given this fact, how can we understand the presence of the Bahunist values—to the extent that they are actually present—in Kathmandu? The puzzle of historical Bahunists and the Bahunist values remains unresolved. In the following section, I examine the historical development of the political institutions and offer an alternative explanation to Bista’s Hindu values thesis.

Political Institutions and Bahunist Values

I showed above that Bista fails to identify the actors—the carriers of the Bahunist values. In his empirical description, he rightly paints a complex and contradictory picture of historical and contemporary Bahuns in Nepal. He, perhaps unwittingly, shows that the Hindu religion and the said Bahunist values have only a tenuous hold on even *proper* Bahuns. If the grip of the values on the Bahuns has been tenuous, Bista would have concluded that the hold of the values on the other caste groups is even more precarious and that

³¹ Gyawali does not mention the source of his data. Chief District Officers are mid-level bureaucrats, mostly undersecretaries in the 1980s, who head Nepal’s seventy-five districts.

other factors might have played roles. Unfortunately, Bista does not pursue this path. The only thing the readers learn for sure in F&D is that the Bahuns and high-caste groups dominate the central administration and politics in Nepal. This is an important but different question.

Who are the historical Bahunists, and what are the characteristics of the political and bureaucratic institutions then? Historically, the Bahuns and Chhetris had been influential in most major hilly petty states even before the rise of the Shahs in the eighteenth century. Their roles in the Gorkhali military campaign that established modern Nepal, their high-caste status and their monopoly over literacy in the ever-rationalizing state virtually guaranteed their entry into the higher echelons of the state (Stiller 1968, 1976, 1995[1973]; Regmi 1976, 1995; Pradhan 1991). Historically, the Nepali state played the role of the landlord and used land as a key mechanism to control, reward and punish state functionaries, including civil and military personnel. As Regmi (1976) argues, a few high-caste Bahun and Chhetri families from the central hills had been the principal beneficiaries of the largess of the newly founded kingdom of Nepal. The roles of the Bahuns are particularly noteworthy. Rana Jang Pande, a Brahman royal preceptor, even managed to get to the position of Mukhtiyar (Prime Minister) in 1837–1838 (Shaha 1990b). Bahuns feature prominently in the palace factional politics, inter-state negotiations and courtly intrigues throughout Nepal's political history. It is, then, not the fatalist Bahunist values but their intimate connection with power centers (with the Chhetris at the helm and the state largess) that historically propelled certain Bahun families into prominence. The high-caste Newars' entry into the Kathmandu ruling elite in the early nineteenth century, similarly, can be understood in terms of their proximity to the seat of power, their (merchant) class power, their familiarity with India and Tibet, and their literacy advantage, including their mastery over foreign languages, in the increasingly rationalizing and globalizing inter-national states system (see also Malla 1992). These *initial* historical advantages set the stage for the dominance of the Nepali state and society by the selected high-caste Bahun, Chhetri and Newar families. But we need to examine the political institutions closely to understand the presence and persistence of the said Bahunist values.

Monarchy has been central to Nepali politics and national imagination, barring the century-long Rana regime (1846–1950), ever since modern Nepal came into existence in the middle of the eighteenth century. Even the Ranas hardly challenged the legitimacy of the institution of monarchy. The

monarchy and the high-caste ruling elite in the “patrimonial bureaucracy” have been the key institutions of domination and exploitation in Nepal (Shaha 1975, 1990a; Regmi 1976, 1995; Stiller 1976, 1995[1973]). As Shaha (1975, 1990a) argues, as soon as the Rana regime ended in 1951, the successive monarchs reasserted themselves by reviving the political institutions and practices prevalent in the Shah courts. It is also noteworthy that the post-Rana governments inherited the bureaucratic culture from the Ranas. As I show below, the Nepali state under monarchy fostered and institutionalized a political culture that Bista mistakenly terms the Hindu Bahunist values.

From Prithvi Narayan Shah on, the Nepali state practiced a peculiar institution called *pajani*. In this system, the king (re)appointed, transferred, withheld, dismissed, or renewed the jobs of state functionaries, including that of the prime minister, in annual *pajani* ceremonies. The Ranas continued the practice and added many layers to it. The *daudāhās* (tour commissions), which continued up to the Panchayat period, was one such layer (Joshi and Rose 1966: 415–417).³² During the Panchayat period, another key institution called *darśan-bhet* (royal audience) was institutionalized by means of a permanent office at the royal palace as well as by periodic tours by the monarchs to different parts of the country. Special tribunals and the *jācbujhendra* (investigation center), directly supervised by the royal palace, became the key institutional means through which politics and bureaucracy were controlled (Shaha 1975, 1990a). These institutions and practices might have served well in the geographical and economic conditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Stiller 1976, 1995[1973]), but as Shaha (1975: 54) observes: “The low morale of the new bureaucratic elite [during the Panchayat period] is largely due to their insecurity of tenure and to the inadequacy of the existing reward and punishment system.”

The insecurity of tenure and the lack of reward and punishment system then became the fertile grounds on which the said Bahunist values flourished as the insecure monarchs used the normlessness and lawlessness to buttress their own power. Shaha (1990a: 34), citing his personal discussion with King Mahendra, notes that the monarch was bent on atomizing senior politicians and bureaucrats so that he could concentrate power in his hands, foster a culture of personal loyalty and create mistrust among the officials. It is well

³² The *daudāhā* team was given sweeping powers to suspend or dismiss government officials as well as to function as district courts. King Gyanendra briefly revived the practice after his takeover in 2005.

known that during the Panchayat regime, only those handpicked by the royal palace could ever dream of getting to senior positions in the army, police and civil service. Similarly, the multilayer indirect representation in the Panchayat institutions until the 1980 amendment of the constitution was designed in a way that only palace confidants stood the chance of ever getting “elected” to the national “legislature” and top positions in the political hierarchy. The national legislature, even after the 1980 referendum, had been a puppet in the hand of monarchy. It is puzzling that Bista entirely avoids the critical accounts of the Panchayat regime and institutions that promoted and nurtured the said Bahunist values in a glaring way.³³

It was well known by the late 1980s that the palace secretariats wielded real power despite the façade of suitable-to-soil democracy. Writing in the 1980s, Shaha (1990a: 27) notes: “The king’s principal secretary, principal military secretary and secretaries in charge of information and of foreign relations are undoubtedly more powerful today than the prime minister, the commander-in-chief or chief of the army staff and the foreign and information ministers respectively.” The palace institutions were not only above the constitution and law but were also not accountable to people for their actions. Former Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, a Panchayat stalwart, coined the term *bhūmīgat giroha* (underground mafia) to describe this duality of power structure in Nepal in the 1980s. Given the lawlessness, personalization and clientelization of the administration and politics, it is not surprising that the practices of *cākari* and *āphno mānche* flourished and deepened during the Panchayat period as insecure state functionaries and politicians jostled to please and win favor of power centers at the royal palace in Kathmandu.

Moreover, it was during the Panchayat period that King Mahendra and King Birendra promoted Hinduism as one of the pillars of Nepali nationalism (Onta 1996, 2006). The royal palace endorsed the caste system with open arms in the name of social order and tradition even after the promulgation of a new civil code in 1963 (Joshi and Rose 1966). To the extent that Hinduism is the source of the caste system and the Bahunist values, the Panchayat and the royal palace must share the blame.³⁴ Given the narrow political base of the

³³ One reviewer of this paper suggested that the repressive state might have been the reason why Bista did not take a critical attitude toward the Panchayat regime.

³⁴ On one occasion, Bista criticizes royal advisors for treating a Shrestha as a Vaishya and a Limbu man as a Shudra in King Birendra’s coronation ceremony in 1975 (Bista 1991: 54–55).

monarchical Panchayat, the centralization of power in Kathmandu, arbitrary rule by *hukum* (order) and the configuration of the political institutions that I described above, the Bahunist values, particularly *cākarī* and *āphno mānche*, seem to be a rational response by aspiring and upwardly mobile bureaucrats and politicians, most of whom came from high-caste groups. Surprisingly, Bista finds the sources of the Bahunist values in the Hindu religion rather than in the monarchy and Panchayat political institutions.³⁵

Conclusion

In this paper, by revisiting *Fatalism and Development*, I argued that Bista's Bahunist values thesis is problematic on both theoretical and substantive grounds. He fails to show fatalism, the most important element of the Bahunist values, as a causal force that affects the political behavior of the high-caste elite in Nepal. He similarly fails to identify the concrete historical Bahunist actors. His neglect of the historical development of political institutions and efforts to avoid power and politics are inexplicable.

Bista does have a point when he identifies *cākarī* and *āphno mānche* as the two key practices in Nepal's central political institutions. But I showed above that the presence and persistence of these practices have little to do with Hindu religious texts and beliefs since these practices exist in different religious contexts. Instead, I proposed that the historical development of political institutions and the roles of monarchy better explain their presence and persistence. One can even argue that the said practices are a rational response to the institutional structure and processes that Nepal has historically witnessed.

My point is that the Hindu religion does not explain the presence and persistence of what Bista terms the Bahunist values. An examination of political institutions, on the other hand, gives us a persuasive and parsimonious answer to the questions that he poses. But the fact is that Nepali rulers have historically drawn on Hinduism, and Nepal officially remained a Hindu state from 1962 to 2008. How can we then understand the behavior of the "Hindu" ruling elite then? This question needs careful

³⁵ Bista presents Gorkha kings Ram Shah and Prithvi Narayan Shah as "egalitarian" rulers who treated the Bahuns *as any other group* (1991: 45) but fails to note that both the Shahs accepted the ritual superiority of the Bahuns and granted them key economic and political concessions (see, Stiller 1968, 1995[1973]; Regmi 1976, 1978, 1995; Riccardi 1977; Pradhan 1991).

comparative research, which is beyond the scope of this paper. But I suggest that there might have been a few “truly” believing rulers; many might have used religion to justify an unequal social order;³⁶ and still others, probably the vast majority, did not see any contradiction in their simultaneous pursuit of otherworldly religious and this-worldly materialist goals. To insist that “Hindu” Nepal had historically been radically different and that some sort of Hinduism dictated the behavior of the Nepali rulers is probably an oversimplification. The life and time of “Swami Nirgunanda” King Rana Bahadur Shah, the grandson of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal, should have served a stark reminder to the scholars who insist on the primacy of Hinduism in the behavior and statecraft of the Nepali ruling elite, but unfortunately, this has not been the case. The Hindu-ness of the Hindu Nepali state stills remains a puzzle.

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³⁶ I suspect that Hindu discourse among the ruling high-caste elite might have become louder and louder in the decades following the Sugauli Treaty in 1816, when inequality started becoming glaring and entrenched in the context of growing rationalization of the state and expanding market forces. Possibly, the modern form of Hindu discourse emerged only in the early twentieth century with the rise of Hindu nationalism in northern India.

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