

Diwas Raja Kc. 2018. *Dalit: A Quest for Dignity*. Kathmandu: Nepal Picture Library.

The book *Dalit: A Quest for Dignity* makes an effort to demystify and redefine Dalit identity by presenting photographs of Dalit lives from the last six decades. The prose and poems place the images in the context of the hierarchical caste system that persists through discrimination, deception, intimidation, and violence. The photographs and the text cumulatively endeavor to cast Dalit stereotypes away from their bodies and into the hierarchical caste system. This thoughtful reading of the Dalit history shows how misplaced are the commonly perceived Dalit images and what an alternative perspective can look like. However, the apparent lack of awareness regarding Dalit diversity and a selective showcasing of Dalit leadership in the last chapter weakens the theoretical vision set in the introduction.

This book has four sections: “Introduction,” “The Toilers of the Land,” “The Sound of the People,” and “The Artisans of Freedom.” In the Introduction, the editor hopes to “reinvigorate the ways in which we tell our histories” (p. 12) and produce “alternative images” in the ways “Dalits understand...their struggle for justice and dignity” (p. 6). This critical perspective directly challenges the common images of Dalits as uncivilized and barbaric, devouring carcasses and filth, and guides readers to look into the photographs of Dalit lives from Dalit perspectives.

The Dalit viewpoint not only sees pain and suffering in their physical labor but also finds art and science in the work of Dalit men and women. The second chapter, “The Toilers of the Land,” depicts Dalits in their daily lives as tailors, sweepers, butchers, farmers, blacksmiths, cobblers, weavers, and construction workers. The images are then complemented with the narratives that define their work as sciences and arts of stitching, ploughing, harvesting, and skinning. The narratives further inspire readers to see the tools used by Dalits as technology in the space and time of the 1960s.

A poem ends the second chapter by asking “What [Dalits] would have achieved if [non-Dalits] hadn’t rejected [them]?” (p. 104). Those who possessed technology and practiced art at a time when the Nepali state did not care much about invention and creativity were, however, discriminated against, humiliated, deceived, and robbed of their assets. Photographs of a loan document and a Dalit man drinking tea from a tin cup show the discrimination and deception used to exploit Dalits of their labor and skills. This alternative perspective helps to relocate the origins of negative Dalit stereotypes away from their bodies and into the hierarchical caste system that not only crushed Dalits but also pushed the country back in invention and exploration.

The third chapter, “The Sound of the People,” gives empowering voice to the sound of Dalits. The chapter presents how Dalits—especially Damai and Gaine—were an integral part of Hindu rituals such as marriages and *pūjās*, rites that they themselves were denied the right to practice. This discrimination pushed them away from Hinduism and fostered a Dalit culture based on their experiences of exclusion and denial, which gave voice to their sounds. Those photos of Dalits playing music that are featured alongside the depiction of atrocities against Dalits for their resistance symbolize Dalit voices raised long for recognition and representation.

The fourth chapter, “The Artisans of Freedom,” presents images of the men and women of the Dalit freedom movement and some of their strategies for the last six decades. The images vividly depict Dalits in various avatars in their efforts to fight discrimination. Dalits educated, organized, and agitated as part of most political movements, including those led by kings and political parties. They also led their own social movements. But their approach remained the same: educate, organize, and agitate. The pragmatic approach comes from the Indian Dalit economist and social reformer, B.R. Ambedkar, whom Nepali Dalits transported to Kathmandu in a litter as depicted very symbolically in a photograph in this chapter.

The editor steps out of our comfort zones to collate the photographs taken by travelers, academic field workers, and the Dalit activists who themselves have been featured in the book. As the photographs were not captured systematically with the objectives to create an archive and write a visual history of Dalit images, they do not get ordered in any chronological or comprehensive way in the book. Yet, the photographs create an unprecedented and thought-provoking perspective to gauge and understand Dalit lives. We so rarely see this, even from historians and/or ethnographers.

Yet, very unfortunately, the book conspicuously neglects community diversity in its representation of Dalit freedom fighters. These errors mostly arise from inadequate community input that is demonstrated in the list of people consulted during the preparation of the book. The ignorance also warns for editorial empathy in understanding and representing Dalit movement, diversity, art, knowledge, and culture.

The last chapter makes a selective and unjustifiably narrow representation of Dalit freedom pathways. The depiction of freedom fighters from only one or two dominant Dalit caste groups, the reproduction of political documents of only one Dalit political sister organization, and the inclusion of only a few of the significant figures fail to produce a comprehensive image of Dalit movements and the changes that they have driven. Madhesi Dalits fought against structural discrimination such as landlessness and political exclusion but their struggle does not find space in the book. Similarly, formidable figures from Dalit freedom movement such as Bal Dev Ram and Santa Bahadur Nepali are not mentioned. It might have been overwhelming to include every event of Dalit struggle for freedom but missing the milestone events, diverse faces and highly influential figures is not excusable.

Similarly, the third chapter identifies Badi women as “sex workers,” a reproduction of a mostly inaccurate image of Badi women. The book’s identification of Badi as “sex workers” serves little purpose other than to juxtapose them with relatively powerful Dalit caste groups such as Kami and Damai. Just as different Dalit caste groups did various skilled works, Badi women invested their talents in the entertainment industry of their era; unfairly, in order to maintain hierarchy, the caste system and patriarchy reproduced their image as “prostitutes” and “sex workers.”

Despite these flaws the book makes a formidable effort to reshape understandings of Dalits. It effectively debunks stereotypes, highlights Dalit struggles against oppression and for equality, and recognizes their talents and contributions to Nepali society. Overall, the book shows alternative paths to reconstruct Dalit images, to reimagine Dalit identity and to create a new value system for their struggle.

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