

Notions of Empowerment

Inner Transformations of Low Caste Women in a Nepali Society

A Thesis

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By

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Nepali festivals are days of people's happiness.

Before, however, were days of women's sadness.

Men in the village always drank and raged.

But now, they have slowly but surely changed.

One festival day, my husband went wild.

An usual account in those old times.

I slept that night with my children in tears.

But the very next morning, I gave him my ideas.

What will be done with our children's education?

What will be done with our children's clothes?

If you have tension, won't you share it with me?

Together, we can solve, can't you see?

I asked him politely, without turning away.

Not just that day, but day after day.

Until he realized that he should not dominate.

Now he shows more understanding and is more sedate.

In August 2003, Kesha Kumari Darjee, an energetic low caste woman in her late thirties, composed and recited this poem as a trainer during a women's rights training session in front of her village neighbors: twenty high caste women from LK¹, a mixed-caste predominantly Hindu locality in Parbat District of western Nepal. Kesha, who had erupted into a well-known women's leader for her active leadership in a micro-credit scheme, a component of a Leadership and Livelihood Improvement Development Project², openly criticizes gender relations in her village once before, when even festivals that primarily allow people to take rest and rejoice, confer men's oppression over women through means of violence, and in reversal through women's ostensible acceptance of violence. Moreover, she elaborates on how she has succeeded in recreating a more egalitarian relationship with her husband through continuous negotiations with him, placing development related aspects: education and clothes for their children that bring benefit to the household as a whole, into the forefront of what needs to be achieved. Kesha, by demonstrating her own experience of identifying importance in the development world, conveys an alternative social order where positive changes in existing people's roles and relationships are possible.

Yet, Kesha, in the beginning of her encounter of this development project in September 1999, would often deplore that "women can not do anything" when I asked her about what she thought of herself and how she is regarded in their society. Other low caste women similarly lamented their inferiority with pain and despair in their facial expressions. Although their words shocked me as it revealed the intensity of how low caste women see themselves as powerless beings, simultaneously, these words endorse the portrayal of low caste women in a Nepalese Hindu society: untouchable women who are naturally devalued and defiled. As Cameron points out, "untouchable women are marginalized ideologically, ritually, economically, socially, and politically" (Cameron

1998:9).

Nevertheless, as in Kesha's poem, low caste women who once perceived themselves and were perceived by the society as "women can not do anything" have changed into "women who can do something" over a few years. Kesha has changed herself and her relationship with her husband. Moreover, she is recognized by other villagers: high caste men and women, and low caste men and women, as one of their leader in their village. Other low caste women who also participated in the development project together with her, also state that they are no longer the same women as before. Some of them have moved into positions of active leadership in the community such as trainers in local NGOs, teachers of primary schools, and organizational members of committees in their village. What this indicates is that LK low caste women have altered both their self-image and social image; and have recreated their roles and relationships with others. This new social order is critically different from their local social order, where low caste women are positioned at bottom rungs of the two major social domains: caste and gender. Furthermore, this new social order is an order which LK residents including low caste women have never contemplated on a few years earlier.

The background explanation to a co-existence of different social orders in one society can be given by Stacy Pigg (1992). She remarks in her study of development in Nepal, "Local people are simultaneously caught up in two social orders: One is the local world of hierarchies of age, gender, and caste or ethnic group [jat]; of relations of patronage; of exclusion; and of exchange. The other is the national society, with its centers and peripheries of development" (Pigg 1992:510). As development has gained increasing importance in LK since mid-1990s, when government and non-governmental driven development projects attached with sources of various powers began to be widely implemented in the area, simultaneous existence of these two social worlds has been

conspicuous. LK residents, come and go in both worlds, rather than live in just one world. Their daily actions are saturated by both, and as they do so they recreate their new roles and new relationships with others and reconfigure the society itself. Yet, this is not sufficient to elucidate why a group of stigmatized and marginalized women can change to an extent where they themselves are creating and contributing to a new social order.

This study is concerned with these qualitative changes of low caste women. As I came to learn during my field work in LK, low caste women have depicted the process of their significant and positive changes using two local terms that derive from the Hindu fundamental principle *aatman* (soul): *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self). Both terms signify one's internal environment or one's internal constitution, suggesting that LK low caste women perceive their pivot of changes as their internal state. Moreover, the notable aspect is that these two terms were engendered from LK low caste women themselves, not by development workers, and were shared across low caste women to translate their changes they were experiencing; which I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, are their expression of their notions of empowerment.

The purpose of this study, an ethnographic study of LK low caste women's empowerment, is to analyze the ideas surrounding LK low caste women's empowerment from the viewpoint of low caste women themselves using their language of empowerment: *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self), as analytical concepts. In particular, I focus on (1) what new feelings and thoughts are emerging from LK low caste women; (2) what new attitudes and behaviors are appearing from them; (3) what are the elements that enhance these changes, (4) to what extent do kinship, gender, and caste relationships change; and (5) what these changes reveal and ramify. In doing so, I derive a model of women's empowerment, that provide insights on how a marginalized group of women can

internalize empowerment when it is considered to be against the dominant social norm and practice.

The significance of this study lies in two aspects. First, by elucidating what empowerment means to LK low caste women, the term empowerment will be defined more precisely within a given context. Although women's empowerment, since the 1990s, has been in the center of local and global development debates, especially of poor women, as scholars who look into the issue of women's empowerment have shown, the term remains ill-defined (Rowlands 1997, 1998; Kabeer 1999; Batliwala 1996; Karl 1995). Moreover, there is a growing recognition that "women's oppression is experienced differently by different groups of women, and that gender relations intersect with other oppressive relations, such as those based on class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual preference (Wieringa 1994: 832). Haleh Afshar concludes, "empowerment as a process must be textured and historically – and geographically-specific if it is to improve the lives of particular groups of women in particular times and places (Afshar 1998:9). Thus, it is more appropriate to investigate empowerment in respective cases and dissect out the real-life implications for certain women, rather than construct a universal measure that will be an overgeneralization and result in many inconsistencies in other women's life situations.

Second, discussing low caste women's everyday lives itself is an over-due subject in the ethnography of Nepal. Mary Cameron, in her notable exceptional study of gender and caste relations from the perspective of low caste women in far western Nepal, critically points out that, "The majority of the anthropological literature on Nepal is about the so-called Tibeto-Burman and other ethnic minorities, many of whom are the Buddhist... While many of these studies are set in communities that are home to lower castes, relationships between different groups are either tangential to the study or are not involved in the issue of interest" (Cameron 1998:14). Another

important study is by Steven Parish (1996, 1998) on identity and self of Newar upper caste and lower caste people in urban Bhaktapur near Kathmandu; however, he focuses on men. Thus, I hope to add to the ethnographic lacuna of low caste women in Nepal.

1.2. Overview

In order to outline my study, I present a portrayal of the six interrelated chapters. This introductory chapter consists of introduction and overview to set the broad context of the study. The second chapter, “Women’s Empowerment in Development” presents a literature review on women’s empowerment in the development arena and attempts to analyze the basic dimensions of women’s empowerment. Then I focus on how women’s empowerment has been encompassed in the development policy and practice of Nepal. The third chapter, entitled “Values and Practices of Hindu Culture in Nepal” explains how Hinduism, the constitutional state religion of Nepal, has transcended a belief and evolved into a deep-rooted culture. I explore one Hindu basic ideology of ritual purity and impurity that perpetuates practices of untouchability and subordination of women and low caste people. I conclude the chapter by situating low caste women in current Nepal. These chapters are designed to give the theoretical background to the ethnographic data I present in the following two chapters.

The fourth chapter, “Low Caste Women in LK, Parbat” starts with my journey to LK. I introduce my interactions with LK residents primarily as a development worker, and discuss my field methods during the five year development project phase from September 1999 to August 2004 and a follow-up research in 2005. Drawing from this fieldwork, with a major focus on LK low caste women, I describe their local world of LK; caste, gender, patronage, kinship relationships, and

women's gendered identity. Then I turn to describe their alternative world of LK; where outside forces, "development" connoted with modernization and democracy is rapidly changing their society. In doing so, I intend to facilitate understanding of the dynamics of the everyday life of LK low caste women.

The fifth chapter, entitled "Empowerment of Low Caste Women in LK, Parbat", presents the analytical framework that I used in order to investigate LK low caste women's notions of empowerment, in which their language of empowerment: *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) are placed at the core. I uncover these two cultural concepts first. After giving a brief summary of the development project LK low caste women participated in, using this analytical framework, I set out to examine LK low caste women's narratives on empowerment in three interrelated domains: self, household, and village. Based on this analysis that dissects out LK low caste women's conception and process of empowerment, I diagnose an empowerment model. This leads to answer why *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) are so central in their empowerment process, and why LK low caste women could recreate their new roles and new relationships with others and reconfigure the society as well, when the dominant social norm and practice is against it.

The final chapter concludes this study by placing LK low caste women's notions of empowerment into the theoretical debate on women's empowerment, and traces out the broader ramifications of low caste women's empowerment in Nepal. Furthermore, I hope to add to the increasing recognition by anthropologists that the culture of a highly structured society is not equivalent: there are alternative discourses to the dominant one (Abu-Lughod 1986).

CHAPTER 2 Women's Empowerment in Development

2.1. Towards Women's Empowerment

Ester Boserup's ground-breaking 1970 study, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, based on extensive research in various developing countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa, pointed out that although women were often the predominant contributors to the basic productivity of their communities, particularly in agriculture; their economic contribution was referred neither in national statistics nor in planning and implementation of development projects. Studies that followed examining the impact of development on women in developing countries revealed that often developing projects ignored women, and not only contributed to the decline of women's status by widening the gap between men and women, but also to a negative affect on these communities as a whole.

By the mid-1970s, recognition of the need to integrate women in development, led to the Women in Development (WID) approach, and was adopted in various development agencies in order to improve women's status. Ironically however, this WID approach resulted again in women's marginalization and was criticized in the late 1970s and early 1980s, "particularly among feminist researchers and activists, on the grounds of its failure to challenge the prevailing development model, its view of women as an untapped labour source which could be used to stimulate economic growth and industrialization, its focus on paid employment for women without taking into consideration the enormous amount of unpaid work women were already doing, its top-down interventions, and above all, its failure to include women's perspectives in planning and policy-making" (Karl 1995:100). It became apparent that WID had unintentionally contributed in promoting feminization of poverty¹.

This led to a conceptual shift in the mid-1980s; a new approach was developed insisting that women cannot be viewed in isolation but rather from a gender perspective: Gender and Development (GAD) approach. GAD, in contrast with WID, emphasizes the need to mainstream women and focus on gender. Mainstream women means to bring women from the margins to the center of the main development programs, increasing women's participation, and ensuring that women's perspectives, needs, and concerns constitute the basis of the redefinition of development itself (Karl 1995:102). The focus on gender rather than women makes it critical to look not only at the category 'women' – since that is only half the story – but as women in relation to men, and the way in which relations between these categories are socially constructed (Moser 1993:3). Men and women play different roles in society, with their gender differences shaped by ideological, historical, religious, ethnic, economic and cultural determinates (Whitehead 1979).

By the 1990s, development interventions moved towards this gendered approach, and the issue of women's empowerment, especially poor women's empowerment, evolved into a central discourse and practice. This was spurred by the increasing global recognition that poverty being linked with gender inequality. In 1993, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicated that "women ('the world's largest excluded group from development'), are frequently shut out from positions of power, are much less likely to be literate than men, and have many fewer job opportunities: in the (developing) countries for which relevant data are available the female human development index is only 60% that of males" (UNDP 1993:25-6). In 1995, UNDP suggested that women made up 70% of the world poor (UNDP 1995). The reduction of poverty thus has to take account of gender inequalities among the poor, including inequalities of power (Kabeer 2003:170). Consequently, women's empowerment came into the forefront of the global development agenda.

The UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 articulated that “We are convinced that women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace”. Moreover, ‘Gender equality and women’s empowerment’ is the third of the eight UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These global statements have highlighted the importance to promote women’s empowerment, not only for women themselves, but for the development of the society as a whole.

2.2. Basic Dimensions of Women’s Empowerment

Empowerment is a widely used but complex and contentious concept in the field of GAD: gender in development (Rekha Datta & Judith Kornberg 2002:1). Although it is important to acknowledge that there is no single answer to what empowerment is, since different women in different places have different priorities that certainly change at different times, it is simultaneously important to identify key features of empowerment that can be used to analyze and debate issues of women’s empowerment. Thus, I discuss recent definitions.

One broadly accepted definition of women’s empowerment is used by the United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN) which describes women’s empowerment as an inclusion of five components: women’s sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (POPIN 1995).

To shed insight on this definition, I draw on theoretical debates that have been taking place

as how women's empowerment should be defined and studied. Jo Rowlands relating her experience based on NGOs working with women's groups in Honduras constructs the definition of empowerment around the meanings of power, which is at the root of the term (Rowlands 1995, 1997, 1998). Reviewing contemporary academic contributions, she views power in four different ways: 1) power over: where one person, or grouping of people, is able to control in some way the actions or options of another; 2) power to: the kind of leadership that comes from the wish to see a group achieve what it is capable of, where there is not necessarily any conflict of interests and the group is setting its own agenda; 3) power with, which "involves a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together" (Williams *et al.* 1995:234); and 4) power within, "the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human (*ibid.*). Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals" (*ibid.*). She concludes that "empowerment, then, is not restricted to the achievement of the 'power over' form of power, but can also involve the development of power to, with and from within" (Rowlands 1998:15).

Naila Kabeer in a discussion in gender mainstreaming and poverty eradication, positions empowerment as the opposite term to disempowerment, and as disempowerment implies to be denied choice, she argues that empowerment refers to "the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer 2003:170). She emphasizes that alternatives, the ability to choose something different, must not only exist, they must also be *seen* to exist, since gender often operates through the unquestioned acceptance of power that leads to forms of behaviour that are based on the absence of choice (*ibid.*:170-71).

Srilatha Batliwala takes the argument further in defining women's empowerment in

relationship with men as “the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power” (Batliwala 1994:130-31). She elaborates, “the goals of women’s empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology (male domination and women’s subordination); to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality (the family, caste, class, religion, educational processes and institutions, the media, health practices and systems, laws and civil codes, political processes, development models, and government institutions); and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources” (*ibid.*).

Thus, drawing from these definitions, women’s empowerment can be discerned to contain three elements: 1) an idea of process, or change from the condition of disempowerment; 2) involves women gaining power and control over their lives, both externally and internally, through expanding their ability to make strategic life choices, and 3) transformative actions that address power inequity in gender roles and gender relations. This process is exercised in individuals and groups, and occurs in various levels: individual, local, national, and international.

2.3. Women’s Empowerment in Nepal

The dramatic political change in 1990 when Nepal restored democracy ushered a new feeling of freedom in Nepalis; in the context of gender people began to publicly voice out gender disparities. This was responded at the national policy level where the low status of women was addressed. The 1990 Constitution proclaims that ‘The State shall not discriminate among citizens on grounds of religion, race, sex, caste, tribe, or ideological conviction or any of these’ (Article 11.3 [part]); stipulating non-discrimination and equality as fundamental rights. The Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)² was ratified in 1991 without reservation.

Moreover, as the response to the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare (later renamed as the Ministry of Women, Children, and Social Welfare) was established in 1995 in order to legislate policies and implement programs that mainstream women into the national development. The Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002), for the first time, raised gender as an issue, and specified to actively involve women in various development fields, to increase women's access to political, economic, and social sectors, and to promulgate legal reforms to ensure women's equal legal rights. The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-2007) has taken a step forward in identifying gender equality and women's empowerment as a key factor in poverty alleviation and human resources development. Along with government initiatives, international development agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) both national and international, have played critical catalyzing roles. Particularly many NGO's working at the grass-root levels have been advocating gender equality and human rights, enhancing women's participation in the development process often mobilizing them into groups, and building networks among these women groups.

However, Nepal has yet to attain success in transforming existing hierarchal gender relations and of women gaining greater control over the sources of power, in order to create equitable participation and equal opportunities to women and men in the society. Indeed, the country's level of women's empowerment remains among the lowest in the world.³ Moreover, gender disparity is pronounced within the country along regional disparities.⁴ This is not unrelated to the fact that rural areas in Nepal is home to some of the poorest human settlements in the world.

UNDP critically points out that the government has yet to adopt a policy of mainstreaming gender as its core strategy in promoting gender equity and equality (UNDP 2004:53). Development programs, policies, and practices that are geared towards women's empowerment are piecemeal.⁵

A study conducted by the Forum for Women Law and Development (FWLD), a Kathmandu-based NGO working on women's rights in Nepal, have identified a total of 118 legal provisions in Nepalese laws, regulations, and its Constitution that discriminate against women in the areas of social, economic, political and family life, including citizenship, inheritance, marriage, adoption, and domestic and foreign employment (FWLD 2000). Although the National Country Code, in its Eleventh Amendment in 2002, repealed a number of provisions in Nepalese law that discriminated against women, particularly with regard to inheritance and property rights, discriminatory provisions remain on the books (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice 2005:15). For instance, the Country Code does not criminalize marital rape and limits property inheritance to women who are unmarried and over the age of thirty-five, whereas men have unconditional inheritance rights (*ibid.*).

Moreover, Nepal is a country that has always favored local custom over law (Cameron 1998:284). Even when the law protects women from discrimination and abuse, women are rarely able to pursue these rights through the legal system, and perpetrators of abuse are seldom punished. Technically, the most significant factors affecting women's ability to pursue their legal rights are poor education and limited access to the legal system (Gilbert 1992:731)⁶. If we refer to Kabeer (2003), these choices are simply not *seen*.

The barrier to women's empowerment is the Nepalese culture⁷ which is rooted in discriminations based on religion, perpetuating both practices of untouchability and the exploitation

of women (UNDP 2004: 31). The Hindu patriarchy and the Hindu ontology of the connection between gender, sexuality, kinship, and inheritance, pervades in most of the country's castes and ethnic groups, and defines women subordinate to men. Senior men are responsible of lineage continuity, and control and provide resources to members of the patrilineal group; making junior men and women, who are identified with their reproductive activities a potent threat to the patrilineal system, dependent on them. Lynn Bennett in her studies of Nepali high caste women confirms this tension in gender relations (Bennett 1983). She further identifies that Hindu patrilineal rituals play an important role in structuring men at the core and women at the periphery in the patrilineal groups (*ibid.*). Women, who enter their husband's patriline as low-status outsiders are excluded from direct participation of key patrilineal rituals; men, on the other hand, are considered permanent members, it is they, preferably sons, who are obliged to key patrilineal rituals, especially to their patrilineal ancestors' funeral pyres to ensure their safe passages to their next lives (*ibid.*). Consequently, Nepal has one of the highest indices of son preference in the world (UNICEF 1996).

What this indicates is that when discussing about women's empowerment in Nepal, examining the Nepalese culture that obstructs this process is crucial, which becomes the task of the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Values and Practices of Hindu Culture in Nepal

3.1. The Dominant Hindu Culture

Hinduism, the constitutional state religion of Nepal, has tenaciously influenced Nepalis lives. Despite the provisions in the 1990 Constitution, which clearly state the freedom to “profess and practice one’s own religion”, Hindu values have exerted vast influence over the nation’s other religions and its general cultural practices (UNDP 2004:31). Although several ethnic groups especially after the restoration of democracy, have started to express their diverse cultural views and retrieve recognition as non-Hindus, people who identify themselves with Hinduism are by the far dominant.¹

Hinduism has been nurtured over the centuries by the Hindu Kings, who in the eye of many Nepalis is perceived to be the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu,² and the high caste Parbatiya Hindu rulers³. When the state of Nepal was unified by the high caste Parbatiya Hindus in 1768, the unifier King Prithivi Narayan Shah called Nepal ‘*asali* Hindustan’ meaning pure land of Hindus (Hachhethu 2003). Ever since then, during the three different phases of modern history of Nepal; under the Shah’s absolute regime (1768-1846), under the Rana oligarchy (1846-1951), and under the Shah’s authoritarian panchayat regime (1960-1990), Hinduism has been utilized for two aspects. First, to link the legitimacy of governance of the high caste Parbatiya Hindu rulers. Second, to forge a unifying national identity of the diverse groups; the Parbatiya Hindus, the numerous Tibeto-Burmese groups, and the Kathmandu valley Newars, into a single social order: the Hindu caste system of Nepal.⁴ The structure of this system can be perceived as high caste Parbatiya Hindus at the pinnacle, the Tibeto-Burmese groups who originally did not have caste

system in the middle, and the low caste Parbatiya Hindus: untouchables at the bottom, with Newars who originally had their own caste system inserted at all levels within the system. As this caste hierarchy entrenched into the Nepalese society, a number of Tibeto-Burmese groups originally Buddhists and Animists gradually adopted Hindu values and practices. Hence, Nepal has been labeled as a Hindu state, and Hinduism institutionalized as national integration took place.⁵

This hegemonic Hinduism, as it has been disseminated in the historical process, is not just a religion but a deep-rooted culture for the Hindus of Nepal. As Dor Bahadur Bista has pointed out, “The Nepali word for religion is *dharma*, which also means duty, ethics, morality, rule, merit and pious acts. Therefore, when Nepalis discuss religion they understand it with a broader meaning than is usually applied in the West” (Bista 1991:27). In contemporary usage, Hinduism as *dharma* is involved with “specific requirements of human action” (Geertz 1973). Hinduism implies making offerings to the Hindu gods, go on regular pilgrimages, performing daily ritual practices, obedience to ritual prescriptions of caste and patrilineal lineage, interpreting the gender codes of being a good Hindu woman or a good Hindu man, giving charity and such.

Thus, rather than a classical doctrine that one believes in, Hinduism has flourished more as a social norm, which regulates and structures the majority of Nepalis everyday thought and behavior. Moreover, despite the fact that Hinduism is undergoing changes and reinterpretation, Hindu values and practices frame the complex relationships within and between the two social groups where Nepalis identify ones place most: caste and gender.

3.2. Ritual Purity and Impurity

When discussing about caste and gender in Nepal, the Hindu oppositional concepts of

ritual purity (*suddha*, *choko*) and impurity (*asuddha*) or pollution (*jutho*, *chau*) are indispensable (cf. Cameron 1998). These oppositional concepts of ritual purity and impurity or pollution have various degrees in between and refer to the states of people, objects, places, and actions. “Ritual purity represents the ideal state and invokes images of fullness or completeness in the specific sense of perfection. For example, a prepubescent unmarried girl, water from a holy river, unboiled milk, *ghee* (clarified butter) and a temple are *suddha* (pure)” (Coward 1989). On the other hand, ritual impurity or pollution represents the degradation of the ideal state. “Pollution is of three broad types: that incurred by death, birth, and miscarriage; contact with various objects (metal, cooking utensils, soiled garments, places, animals); and parts of the body (feet, sex organs) and bodily substances (saliva, phlegm, semen, blood)” (Cameron 1998:7). These oppositional concepts of ritual purity and impurity or pollution are extremely important and vividly exposed in Nepalis everyday life.

From the viewpoint of caste and gender, these oppositional concepts bring out the practice of untouchability of women and low caste people. It is in the “nature” of certain classes of people to possess impurity in varying degrees, such as women who have bodily impurity and lower castes have both bodily impurity and what is called “occupational” impurity (Glucklich 1984:26). Bodily impurity is associated with women due to their female sex; they menstruate and give childbirth. During these temporal and personal periods of impurity, women become untouchables and are avoided; they face various social and behavioral restrictions of exclusion.⁶ However, their impurity can be redeemed immediately or at the end of the certain period, by adequate rites or rituals (Hofer 1987:89). In contrast, occupational impurity associated with the lower castes is perceived permanent and severe, “because they handle materials (metals, leather) and perform acts (ploughing,

eating beef) considered impure” (Cameron 1998:7). Occupational impurity invokes images of filth, decay, and death, and is affiliated with the whole caste category. Moreover, this impurity is passed onto the next generation. (On the other hand, high caste people’s purity is passed onto their next generation.) Thus, as low caste people inherit and embody impurity from the past, they are perceived as permanently untouchables and thus excluded, particularly in the spheres of commensality, worship and marriage (Hofer 1987). High caste people will not accept water and food from low caste people let alone eat together with them, low caste people are prohibited from entering the house of a person whose caste is superior to them, low caste people are excluded from conducting Hindu worships in temples, inter-caste marriage is prohibited. The modern Nepalese state no longer enforces these systems of exclusions, but the basic pattern persists (Parish 1998).

Interaction between castes and between men and women is partly regulated by rules of impurity avoidance (Cameron 1998:7). These rules that make women and low caste people untouchables, whether temporarily or permanently are reinforced by daily practices of untouchability, which results in exclusion of and discrimination towards women and low caste people, in turn asserts authority and dominion of men and high caste people. As deliberate transgression of codes of conduct between pure and impure people is considered a sin, women and low caste people ostensibly obey these rules because they do not want to become sinful (cf. Cameron 1998).

3.3. Situating Low Caste Women

Low caste women, who are now also called Dalit women in Nepal⁷, are situated at the lowest positions of the two major hierarchies of Nepalese society: caste and gender. This position endures them to take the double burden of caste and gender stigmatization and discrimination.

Dalit women lag far behind Dalit men and “upper caste” women in terms of healthcare, education, and remuneration for their labor (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice 2005:12). Together with the reinforcement of practices of untouchability, this has culminated into a cycle of penury and deprivation of low caste women.

According to a 1999 Human Rights Watch report: “In Nepal, Dalit women are economically marginalized and exploited, both within and outside their families. As the largest group of those engaged in manual labor and agricultural production, their jobs often include waste disposal, clearing carcasses, and doing leatherwork. Despite their grueling tasks and long hours, exploitative wages ensure that Dalit women are unable to earn a subsistence living. In some rural areas Dalit women scarcely earn ten to twenty kilograms of food grain a year, barely enough to sustain a family. Many have been driven to prostitution.” (HRW 2001:21).

In order to improve Dalits socio-economic conditions, a committee for the advancement of the Dalits, “Depressed, Oppressed, Dalit Group Development Committee” was established in 1996 under the Minister of Local Development (UNDP 2004:59-60). Currently, 111 NGOs for Dalit advancement are run by Dalits themselves (UNDP 2004:60). However, enhancement of Dalit opportunities, especially of Dalit women, is against social norms and practices, although not against the state, since reform of existing social and power relations is inevitable. In reverse, Dalit women’s empowerment has the potential to bring changes in existing social and power relations, that exclude women and low caste people that has been illegal and discriminatory. This is the very significance of taking their empowerment into the forefront of change.

CHAPTER 4 Low Caste Women in LK, Parbat

4.1. Journey to LK

To begin this chapter that discusses low caste women in LK, a pseudonym for two neighboring mixed caste villages located in Parbat District of western Nepal, I introduce how I became acquainted with the place and the people. I first arrived in LK in late September 1999, not as a researcher, but as a young female Japanese development worker from a Japanese NGO. I was accompanied by Durga Adhikari¹ who was born and grew up in LK, and two other Nepali staffs from my Nepalese local counterpart NGO; all three of them were high caste male. Our purpose was to implement the “Leadership & Livelihood Improvement Project” (project phase: 1999-2003) designed mainly for low caste women in five neighboring villages of Parbat District, including LK.

To reach LK from Kathmandu, I took an eight hour long-distance bus ride to Kusma, the district center of Parbat District. After meeting my local counterpart staffs in Kusma, we set out southwestward on foot; the only way to reach there during that time. Once out of Kusma, and across a suspension bridge over the Kali Gandaki River, a magnificent view stretched out before my eyes. The snowcapped Annapurna range, the sloping green hills below with small mud houses with thatched roofs scattered on its sides, the neatly terraced lush rice fields with countless rivulets flowing throughout, and the slow-walking donkey caravans carrying goods across the gorge; all formed a picturesque landscape in the serene autumn air. Six hours trekking through this scenery, on a narrow foot trail that often accommodates only two passer-bys, led us to K village.

When we reached K village, we received a courteous welcome mostly by high caste elderly men who were involved in local politics in LK; however, low caste women, whom I expected

to work together with, were nowhere to be seen. Instead, after the gathering, a long discussion broke out on where to accommodate me. Whilst I conveyed my preference to live at least near low caste people's residence since I saw myself as a development worker, the local politicians strongly recommended me to homestay at the VDC chairman's² house: the most lavish house in K village. "We are honored to have you. We want to give you the best accommodation and serve you well." they stressed on my identity as a guest. What they did not tell me directly were their concern in lowered voices about their responsibility to protect me since I was young, a girl, unmarried, had come all the way from Japan alone, and had the intention to somewhat participate in development of their villages.

At dusk at last, the discussion was over, and I was invited to live together with Durga's wife's mother's family. Indeed, their house was located at the border of high caste and low caste people's residence in L village. However, I quickly came to understand that this decision was based more on the fact that this family was appropriate in village leaders' eyes to host a foreign guest, a young girl, and a development worker. It was a family of a high caste with good status through marriage ties with Durga's family, enabling them to "serve me well". It was also a family where Durga and other village leaders could come and protect, discuss, and give advice to me, whenever they thought necessary.

When I reached my new home, I was introduced by Durga to the family:³ a mother and three sons, who warmly and curiously welcomed me into their house. As I developed closer ties with each of them, my status gradually superseded from a foreign guest to a family member. This became conspicuous especially with my Nepali mother, after I joined mourning with the family over the death of her youngest son in 2002. At the same time, my status as a guest was never completely

lost either, since my contribution to household work was limited compared to a normal work load of a daughter in her natal home, owing to the fact that this family accepted my preference to concentrate more on my development work.

This concentration on my role as a development worker was occasionally met by silent disapproval from village leaders of LK, although I did not think it appropriate to defy them since it would not only jeopardize my relationship with them but negatively affect the whole development project itself. Signs of disapproval came from the very beginning of my stay in LK. Whenever I tried to visit low caste women's households, village leaders or my local counterpart staffs who had been pressured by them would smile and postpone the visit with all sorts of reasons from describing the extreme busy life of low caste women to a frantic invitation to an abrupt ceremonial occasion. I started to realize that I was been actively kept away from low caste women. Gradually, it became clear that village leaders and I had different opinions over whom to engage in the project, even though I had received an official letter via my counterpart NGO that approved project implementation for low caste women with signatures of both LK VDC chairmen. Several discussions with village leaders that clarified and promised some positions for the two VDC chairmen and some other prominent political figures finally led to withdrawal of these invisible restrictions on where I could go and with whom I could speak, provided that I am accompanied with at least one of my local counterpart staff.

Satisfied with this decision, I set out with Durga to low caste women's households. As I set foot in the low caste residence, I was startled to see such difference compared to the high caste residence. Human and animal excrement were on the trails, flies were flying here and there, houses were crumbling, water taps were out of order, and malnourished children were filthy in rags. I was

more startled when I walked up to a low caste women's home. When she saw us approaching her house, she looked terrified, immediately stopped washing dishes in the front yard and ran back into her house. She was not an exception. It became our daily task to visit them and convince first their husbands and in-laws that we were not there to intimidate them, but to learn about their lives and seek how to work together with them to improve their livelihoods, including their households as a whole.

Only after gaining trust with low caste women's household members, could we organize a small meeting with a group of low caste women alone under a *chautaaraa*⁴ near their residence. This first meeting was bizarre both for me and for them. I can still recollect their downcast eyes and their strained faces as they gathered around. When they talked, they either whispered or shouted with a hoarse voice. When I welcomed them by touching their hand, they bolted as if they were struck with electricity. It was clear that they had never had a chance to mingle among themselves, not to mention among different castes. As they told me later, it was their first experience to come to a meeting, introduce themselves to each other and to people of different castes, and to be physically touched as a sign of friendship by a different caste.

Their first nickname for me was "Japanese doll" which I later came to know when I heard them singing that a "Japanese doll" had come to meet them. This naming made a contrast with my two female local counterpart staffs; both of them were addressed by them as *didi*, a kinship term meaning older sister which is a normal way of addressing a young female in LK. This indicated that I could not be categorized in their social world in the early days of our encounter. However, as they started actively participating in the project, they started to address me by my given name, and related to me either as their own consanguineal relative who would support them in their

utmost need, or as a intimate development worker to work together with in project activities. They chose my identity as it suited their own purposes, a consanguineal relative, a development worker, or sometimes both, according to various social situations. This strategy of choosing my identity that fitted their own purpose was used tactfully by other villagers as well.

My relations with LK villagers changed over time during the five year phase project. Although my identity as a development worker chiefly shaped my relationships with LK villagers, due to the prestige and expectations associated with the project, my increase in participation in their social life until my existence became more natural in the area, enabled me to learn to use my particular position by skillfully integrating or switching my different identities that suited not only their interests but my own interests as well. Besides, towards the end of the project, I got married and was no longer a young girl that needed careful protection over every action. Then came my final visit for a follow-up research after a year of the project phase where LK villagers accepted me more as a long-parted relative. I was for them and for myself: a development worker, researcher, daughter, sister, and guest.

4.2. Field Methods

I have conducted field work in countless trips to LK during the five year project phase from 1999 to 2004, and a one month follow-up research in the autumn of 2005. My major focus was on LK low caste women's lived realities and their perception of empowerment. However, in order to comprehend what is happening in and around LK low caste women's lives, an analysis of caste and gender interactions were crucial. Thus, I have also included research on low caste men and high caste men and women to some extent. The extensive field work during the project phase

has given me the deepest understanding of LK culture, and has laid the foundation of this study. However, the follow-up research in 2005 that contained various questions generated during the former research period has crystallized my arguments. The main field methods I chose are as follows.

1. Participant observation

Like many ethnographers, I find that much of what I have learned has been from the process of taking part in, and standing somewhat apart from, the life of the village (Ahearn 2001:35). As I became more involved in LK social life, I observed and participated in various gender and caste interactions involving different castes and gender. Salient experiences were 1) Household work, such as fetching water, cleaning the house, collecting fodder and firewood, shopping daily goods in small stores in the village, cooking staple food *dal-bhat* (lentil broth and boiled rice); 2) Agriculture work, such as planting and husking rice, weeding the fields, harvesting crops, feeding and milking buffaloes and cows; and 3) Ceremonial occasions, such as weddings, funerals, festivals, religious activities including witch-craft for curing diseases and locating lost relatives.

2. Interviews

I conducted numerous structured, semistructured, and unstructured interviews with LK villagers, from different castes and gender, about their life histories, caste, gender, and development. I usually took light notes during the discussion, and later rewrote detailed notes from memory. These interviews provided enormous insight on how people perceived their selves, others, and the rapid change in their society. These detailed ethnographic accounts also illuminated their struggles on how they constitute themselves in their society where they both agree and disagree with the dominant ideologies in LK.

3. Household survey

During 2001, I designed a survey to collect more thorough information on low caste women's household situation. Together with my local counterpart staff, I administered the survey to 50 low caste women's households in LK. The data generated were on caste, gender, age, kinship relations, education, agriculture production, artisan production, and daily diet. This basic data helped to contextualize my other data.

4. Group discussions and Focus group discussions

I facilitated numerous group discussions and focus group discussions with low caste women. Topics on group discussions were relatively non-specific. Common topics were LK low caste women's anxieties and hopes, experiences in their daily lives, opinions toward project activities, and solutions toward issues that had arisen between them or within their households, or other villagers. Topics on focus group discussions were specific and prepared beforehand. Common topics were LK low caste women's perceptions towards the impact of development activities, values behind certain caste or gender based behavior, and how to take collective actions towards present and future development activities in LK. Both group and focus group discussions enabled LK low caste women to "stimulate each other in an exchange of ideas that may not emerge in individual interviews or surveys" (Billson 2004:1).

5. Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) workshops

I conducted several PLA⁵ workshops, which enabled LK low caste women to discover and describe their knowledge on subjects that mattered to them, and also to analyze, plan, act, monitor, and evaluate the project activities by themselves. These PLA workshops indicated that, when given the opportunity, low caste women, although illiterate and marginalized, could analyze

their situation by mapping, listing, ranking, scoring, and diagramming, better than development professionals (cf. Chambers 1997). Since the outcome of these workshops was cross-checked by several different low caste women's groups in LK, these became a valuable resource that I drew on to comprehend low caste women's perception and situation in LK.

6. Narratives surrounding empowerment

In thirty in-depth conversations with LK low caste women, I attempt to elicit what empowerment means to them. Most of these conversations were taped and all were transcribed in full, with the patience and help of two of my local counterpart staff, and Ms. Sushma Pant⁶, a highly articulate and educated woman in Kathmandu. These narratives formed the crux of my study where I learned how LK low caste women shared and defined the concept of empowerment in their local context, and how they had internalized and exteriorized the process.

7. Personal communication

Personal communication with LK villagers and my local counterpart staff also gave me a lot of insight on caste, gender, development, empowerment, and many other issues that are important to them in their daily lives. Actually, it was sometimes these personal communications that opened my eyes to what I could not have otherwise understood. Intimate relationships with LK villagers set an atmosphere where I could "ask questions when people were already discussing a particular subject or event instead of out of the blue" (Abu-Lughod 1986:24). In this way, I was led to empathize and appreciate their feelings and conceptions in LK.

4.3. Place

LK, the two neighboring villages located in Parbat District of western Nepal, lies some

320 km to the west of Kathmandu, in the west development region of Nepal. From Kusma, the center district of Parbat District, LK is a three to five hour walk southwestward for locals. Geographically, LK is located within the middle hills and stretches out alongside the Kali Gandaki River with the elevation approximately between 1000 to 1500 meters. This natural environment frames the identity of LK as agrarian mountain villages, ubiquitous in the rural areas of the middle hills of Nepal.

The climate of LK belongs to the subtropical humid zone with the annual rainfall ranging from 2300 to 2500 mm. According to the villagers, there are three distinct seasons: rainy season (June to September), dry season (October to February), and hot season (March to May). The rainy season starts with the arrival of the monsoon. Warm and humid weather with frequent heavy rainfalls, often preceded by violent lightning and thunderstorms, lasts through mid to late September. The start of the dry season is marked by a change in the sky: the heavy rain clouds disappear and the sky turns into a dazzling clear blue. Crisp days continue until the end of December, when it starts to get cold during the nights, and foggy in the early mornings. The coldest month is January; the minimum temperature drops to around 5 centigrade. A steady increase in the temperature marks the arrival of the hot season until the hottest month of April comes with the maximum temperature of around 28 centigrade. Sunny, windy, and dusty days, with occasional short rainfalls continue until a wave of humid air reaches at the beginning of June.

These rich seasonal changes have nurtured diverse vegetation and cultivation in LK. Indeed, LK is commonly known by locals as a “place of (wild) fruits” ample in the forests. Ironically, according to the villagers, this was true until a generation before, when the area was sparsely populated and the forests dense. However, as the population has rapidly increased, large

areas of these forests have been laboriously developed into terraced fields covering the steep slopes, that now produce rice, millet, corn, wheat, potatoes, and lentils, basics of the people's daily diet. In recent years, population pressures on the mountain slopes have led to excessive deforestation, resulting in severe degradation of the forests and soil erosion in LK.

Infrastructure in LK has rapidly developed from the late 1990's. A motor road is under construction from Kusma to L village as of this writing. Electricity is sporadically available in K village; a few electric bulbs for households that can afford the electric wire and the bill, but not to L village so far, although telegraph poles have been standing from 2002. Telephone lines for village telephones have followed, although not reliable. Agriculture irrigation pipes and household toilets have been built mainly in high caste people's residence in both villages. Small tea shops and stores that sell daily goods such as candles, matches, soap, kerosine, cigarettes, batteries, biscuits, have erupted. A government health center, awaited by villagers, was built in K village in 2004. Besides these recent developments, there are old Hindu temples, several *chautaraa*'s, public water wells and water taps for every ten to twenty households, rice mills, oil mills, a VDC building for village meetings, a health post, several government and private primary schools, and a government high school in each village.

4.4. People

During the project phase of 1999 to 2004, the approximate population of K and L village was 2000 people respectively (HMG Nat. Planning Commission Secretariat Central Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2001, 2002). People were settled and organized in a joint, stem, or nuclear family in the paternal line. The average number of members in this domestic unit: households, was 5.5,

making the approximate number of households around 360 in each village. Households, here, as elsewhere in Nepal, provided the key social context for the everyday experiences and identities of its members, and mediated individual and group relations within wider historical and cultural processes (Gray 1995).

The majority of LK residents belong to the ethnic group of Parbatiya Hindus, who are the original Nepali speaking people. LK residents, as Hindus, have a strong belief in Hindu religion; daily and life cycle rituals of Hindu culture are blended into village life. Moreover, the Hindu caste system is firmly operated within the group: high caste Parbatiya and low caste (untouchable) Parbatiya. Until the outset of the motor road construction in 2001, LK had been a relatively isolated area; outsiders passing through or moving in were rare, furthermore, inter-caste marriage has been and is still a taboo. This has enabled LK residents to largely retain their ethnic/caste composition and identity that is underlined by their strong belief in Hindu ideology.

This Hindu ideology is where LK residents form and organize their patterns of everyday life around. The paramount Hindu ideology influencing LK residents' norms and practices can be characterized into two aspects: 1) the Hindu oppositional concepts of ritual purity and impurity, and 2) the Hindu patrilineal ideology connected to land. Combination of these two aspects have framed actions and interactions of LK residents, especially in caste and gender relationships, converging power to male and high castes, in reverse, diverging power from female and low castes. People remain dominated not through the force of ideology alone but also through the practices and techniques of domination (Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1972). I now turn to describe caste and gender hierarchies and practices in LK in order to analyze how LK low caste women are constructed in the society.

4.5. Caste

4.5.1. Caste Hierarchy and Caste Composition

The LK caste hierarchy is divided into three distinct hereditary caste groups, in both villages. The basis for the caste division in LK persists to be the Hindu oppositional concepts of ritual purity and impurity, which is associated with the occupations and symbolic roles of one's caste status. First, the LK Parbatiya Hindus divide themselves broadly into a two layer hierarchy of unsymmetrical caste groups: the majority is represented by the high caste Parbatiya group who belong to the water-acceptable category that is ritually pure, and the minority by the low caste Parbatiya group who belong to the water-unacceptable category that is ritually impure and untouchable. Second, between the high caste Parbatiya group and the low caste Parbatiya group, a very small number of different ethnic groups, mostly Gurung and Newar, who also reside in LK, are inserted as the middle caste group who belong to the water-acceptable category as well⁷. No pure caste is allowed to accept water from an impure one, and no impure caste is allowed to accept water from another lower-ranking impure caste (Hofer 1979:56).

The high caste Parbatiya group is further internally divided into two hierarchical caste groups: Bahuna⁸ (Hindu Priests) and Chetri (warriors). The low caste Parbatiya group too is internally hierarchically divided into four caste groups: Sonar (goldsmiths), Kami (blacksmiths), Sarki (leatherworkers), and Damai (tailors and entertainers). Sonar and Kami are considered to be of equal rank and are the highest among the low castes; under Sonar and Kami, Sarki follow, and the lowest caste of all is the Damai.⁹

Thus, the caste hierarchy and composition in LK creates an inverted triangle, a large

majority of high caste Parbatiya at the apex, a handful of middle castes from different ethnic groups in between, and a minority of low caste (untouchable) Parbatiya at the bottom, which is a “typical caste composition in Parbatiya Hill Hindu villages” (Bista 1999). (See figure 1.)

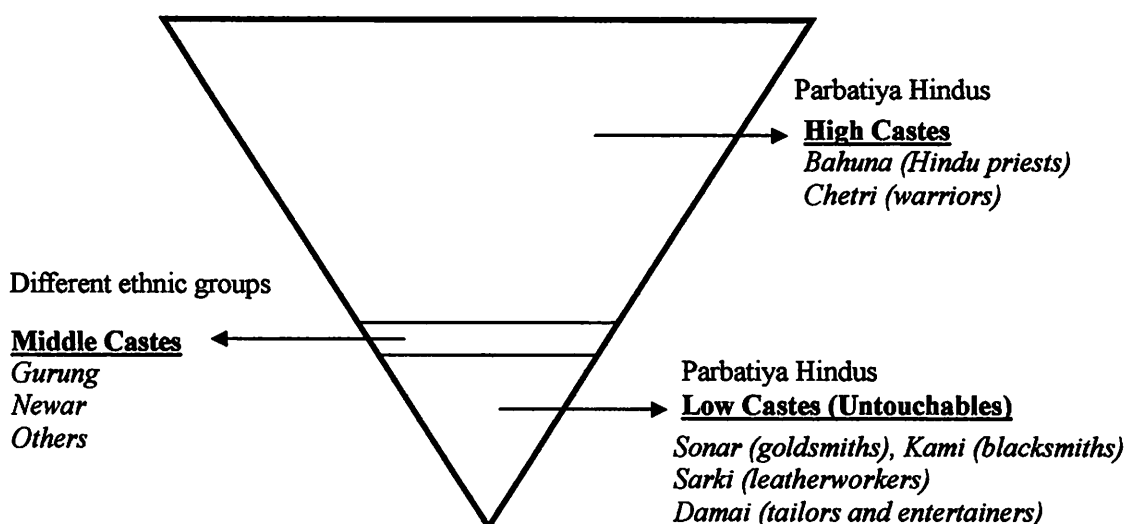


Fig. 1. Model of caste hierarchy and caste composition in LK

In K village, high castes consist 66.4% (Bahuna 54.6%, Chetri 11.8%), middle castes 6.7%, and low castes 26.9% (Sonar 2.2%, Kami 8.4%, Sarki 7.2%, Damai 9.1%). In L village, high castes consist 71.5% (Bahuna 58.1%, Chetri 13.4%), middle castes 4.0%, and low castes 24.5% (Sonar 4.8%, Kami 10.7%, Sarki 0.3%, Damai 6.5%, Unidentified Dalit 2.2%). (HMG Nat. Planning Commission Secretariat Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

Practices of untouchability between caste relationships prevail in daily life of LK. Low caste people as “untouchables are seen as dirty, disgusting, impure, as highly sexual and promiscuous, as ignorant and lacking the discipline and mastery of language that would make them truly human” (Parish 1998). Low caste groups are excluded from public spaces, such as Hindu temples and village meetings. Low caste people can not enter high caste people’s house, let alone eat and drink together with them. They can not speak face to face with high caste people either, when there is a need, high caste people position themselves in a higher place, whereas low

caste people squat down on the dirt. When a high caste person gives something to a low caste person, he/she either puts it on the floor, or throws it into awaiting hands of a squatting low caste person; a method of giving that prevents any direct contact between them. When a high caste person, accidentally or inevitably has direct contact with a low caste person, the high caste person must counteract the pollution by sprinkling water over him/herself.

Moreover, these rules of purity-impurity conduct are implied within the low caste group as well. The higher group of low castes will imply these codes to the lower group of low castes. For instance, Sonar and Kami will not accept water from a Sarki or a Damai. Thus, within the low caste group, interaction is also partly regulated by rules of impurity avoidance; low caste people who belong to a different caste group stigmatize those who belong in a lower position than them, validating Damai to be the untouchables to all villagers in LK.

4.5.2. Caste Occupation and Livelihood in High Caste and Low Caste Households

The basis of the agrarian livelihood in LK has been systematically arranged and maintained on a self-sufficient circulation among caste groups at each village level. In both villages, people of the high caste households make their living as subsistence farmers and own land, and people of the low caste households are hereditary artisans and marginal farmers who hardly own land. High caste households in LK indispensably rely on low caste households as laborers. Without the low caste households' provision of artisan services and labor work, their livelihood would not be possible. Likewise, low caste households' livelihood would not be possible either without the demand for their artisan services and labor from high caste households (and other low caste households). Thus, the agrarian livelihood in LK has been carried out by the inter-dependent

relationship between high caste households and low caste households in their respective villages.

High Caste Households

Although high caste households: Bahuna and Chetri, respectively represent Hindu priests and warriors, only a few of the Bahuna men make their living as Hindu priests, similarly, only a few of the Chetri men make their living as army or police officers. These occupational works are side jobs from their regular work as subsistence farmers. Some Bahuna and Chetri residents, both men and exceptionally women, have side jobs as teachers, shopkeepers, and government officers as well. However, the major source of income for the majority of the Bahuna and Chetri households is subsistence farming through control over their own land, which is inherited from one's lineage.

Bahuna and Chetri households own various types of land. On land where irrigation is available, rice and wheat, as semiannual crops are intensively cultivated. On land where irrigation is not available, millet and maize are rainfed. In separate small plots on irrigated and non-irrigated land, potatoes, lentils, blackgram, and rape seeds are planted. Pasture and grass lands are essential for their livestock: cows, oxen, buffalos, commonly kept for milk products, draft power, and primary source of compost. In the homestead areas, kitchen gardens with leaf vegetables, gourds, cucumbers, radish, cauliflower, and garlic are grown; fruit trees, mainly orange and lemon, and fodder trees are planted. Diverse agriculture products harvested from their lands secure Bahuna and Chetri households annual food needs and their minimal living expenses. Thus, most of the Bahuna and Chetri households are self-sufficient, but only a handful of well-off Bahuna and Chetri households can market their surplus products to gain a certain amount of income.

Low Caste Households

The occupational specialties of low caste households: Sonar (goldsmiths), Kami (blacksmiths), Sarki (leatherworkers), and Damai (tailors and entertainers), had once been a reliable income source to sustain their livelihood. However, in recent years, numbers of low caste households have left their artisan work and have become only marginal farmers. This is because their artisan commodities have been rapidly replaced with out-of-village commodities, including cheap Indian products flocking into the nearby markets. In order to make their living, many low caste households have lost their artisan skills and have altered themselves into mere marginal farmers, enforcing their already vulnerable economic situation furthermore. Currently, more low caste households spend more time in agriculture work rather than artisan work.

Nevertheless, some low caste households do continue to uphold their artisan works that feature them largely. Sonar households as goldsmiths make and mend gold and silver jewelry, such as necklaces, rings, earrings, nose rings, and bracelets, typically presented as gifts to daughters, sisters, and brides, during life cycle rituals and marriage ceremonies. Sonar households are the most prosperous among low caste households, since their products are more expensive than those of the other low caste households. Kami households as blacksmiths make and mend the metal agricultural tools and household utensils, such as ploughshares, sickles, hoes, axes, shovels, knives, nails, containers, pots and pans. Kami households are also economically secure among low caste households, since practically all households in LK require their commodities. Sarki households as leatherworkers make and mend products from buffalo hides, such as plough harness, leather sandals and shoes. Sarki households are the poorest caste in LK, since production of their commodities is time-consuming; the preparation of a buffalo hide lasts for more than months, and the need for their

commodities is irregular. Damai households play a double role of tailors and entertainers. As tailors they sew and patch clothes. For men, shirts, jackets, trousers, tunics, caps, and underwear; for women, blouse for sari, cotton slip under sari, dress, skirt, and *kurta* (girl's tunic and pants), and for babies, cotton shirts and trousers just for their size, are needle worked either by hand or by a sewing machine. As entertainers, they play flutes and drums, sing, and dance, during festive occasions. Damai households are economically not secure either. All artisan work done by low caste households are perceived to be impure and lowly, since every work involves the disruption of the natural state of a substance and from a more widely perspective it is noisy and dirty. However, the artisan commodities, whether produced internally or externally, are required to maintain LK agrarian society.

However, as aforesaid, low caste households can no longer live by these traditional occupations alone. Most low caste households are marginal farmers as well and own or rent small sizes of infertile non-irrigated land, very rarely rice-fields. Their major crop is rainfed millet and maize. They do not make kitchen gardens nor do they grow fruit and fodder trees. They do not own pasture and grass lands either. They are fond of livestock, though the number they keep is less than high caste households. One ox or one buffalo, a couple of goats and two or three chickens are usually raised in a small hut near their households. Agriculture products of low caste households, in contrast to high caste households, are short in both variety and quantity, and for the most part secure only two to six months food yearly.

Patronage-Client System between High Caste Households and Low Caste Households

There is a traditional patron-client system complexly interwoven into the agrarian

livelihood in LK which involves nearly all high caste and low caste households. Low caste households are clients of two to three high caste households on average, who in turn become patrons to them. The client low caste household provides their patron high caste households, specific artisan services, agriculture labor and non-agriculture labor. Agriculture labor includes carrying compost to the fields, ploughing, weeding, harvesting, taking care of livestock, and collecting fodder and fuelwood. Non-agriculture labor includes washing clothes and cleaning the toilets. In exchange for the client low caste households' artisan services and labor, the patron high caste households provide harvest shares and cash. The patron high caste households are also expected to lend money to their client low caste households in their time of need. This labor contract is yearly renewed, but most of the households inherit the relationship patrilineally, and the system has been passed from father to son for generations. The notable aspect of this system is that the backbone is not just economic, but also religious. A lot of the contract work done by low caste households, not only their artisan work, but also their agriculture and non-agriculture work such as ploughing fields and cleaning toilets are perceived impure, which high caste households are forbidden to do. If not inherently impure, it is physically hard.

In conclusion, high caste households and low caste households are bound together economically and religiously in an inter-dependent relationship in each village in LK. However, this relationship is not on an equal footing. Low caste households are undertaking impure work or hard physical labor, whereas high caste households are having impure work and hard physical labor done for them. This dominant relationship between high caste people and low caste people extends over religious ideology and is enforced by two practical aspects. First, the everyday practices of the ritual purity and impurity codes between high caste and low caste people such as commensality,

proximity, worship, and marriage that perpetuates in LK, compel subordinate positions of low caste people. Second, land, is largely owned by high caste people, and is not sold unless at their peril. To own land in peasant economies is to have power; domination begins with control over the most valuable resource – land (Cameron 1998). Thus, in LK, the purity-impurity codes of conduct, and the ownership of lineage land, converge power into high caste households and position them into core positions ritually, economically, and politically, whereas low caste households remain ritually, economically, and politically, in the periphery.

4.6. Gender

4.6.1. Gender Hierarchy

Gender relations in LK are hierarchal; women are recognized to play a submissive role compared to men. A woman's subordination is expressed in a common saying in LK; "to speak by a woman, to decide by a woman is like crowing by a hen." This proverb reflects a common belief among LK residents on gender roles and gender relationships that as a hen can only but cackle and under no circumstances crow 'cock-a-doodle-doo' like a cock, women do not have the abilities to give their opinions, or to make decisions by herself, for it is men who have the abilities to make suggestions and decisions, and initiate actions. A woman who takes up this man's role, whether in a private or public domain, is performing an act she can not achieve. When a woman rarely does, men and other women will often ridicule her and say; "misfortune will enter our (her) house". This indicates that women are considered from both women and men to be an inferior existence compared to men in the ability to think and the ability to act, inside and outside the household.

This dominant gender hierarchy claiming women's inferior status to men is underlined by

the values and practices of the Hindu patrilineal ideology, and the purity-impurity codes of conduct. The Hindu patrilineal ideology lays emphasis on son's preference in order to maintain lineage continuity (Bennett 1983). The purity-impurity codes classify women to be less pure than men, due to their sexuality. Although, everyday interactions between women and men are complex, and women do not always submit themselves to men in everyday practice, the mode of gender hierarchy is largely reproduced and influential in LK. Moreover, gender hierarchy differs in degree at different caste levels.

4.6.2. Gender Hierarchy in High Caste and Low Caste Households

There is more gender hierarchy in high caste households compared to low caste households, although gender hierarchy exists in both social spheres. A survey I conducted with high caste women and low caste women reveals this degree of difference. In this survey high caste women and low caste women were individually asked to diagram their perception of their household members' relationships. I draw on two household diagrams that were presented from two women, one a high caste and the other a low caste, which echoes many other voices of women from their respective caste groups in LK.

High Caste Households

Shakuntala Sharma (25 years old, K village) belongs to a high caste household, which consists of six members of four generations. Figure 2 is the household diagram made by herself. The leaf represents her household, where the tip indicates the pinnacle and the stem the nadir. On this leaf, garlic cloves and maize seeds that represent men and women of her household are

positioned according to her perception.

Shakuntala ranked her six household members in a descending order: her father-in-law, her husband, her grandmother-in-law, her five-year-old son, her mother-in-law, and herself. Five points can be discerned. First, all her household members are positioned in a straight line hierarchy that either ranks oneself higher or lower than another household member with no equal standing. Second, the highest position is her father-in-law, the patriarch, and her husband ranks next to him. Third, the lowest position in the household is herself. Four, her five-year-old son ranks higher than herself and her mother-in-law. Five, the only woman who ranks above men is her grand-mother-in-law, but that is only in relation to her five-year-old great grandson. In relation to her son, who is the patriarch, and her grandson, who is Shakuntala's husband, she ranks lower. When I asked the reason why she had placed her household members in this order, she answered, "Men are more powerful aren't they? That is the fate from the beginning."

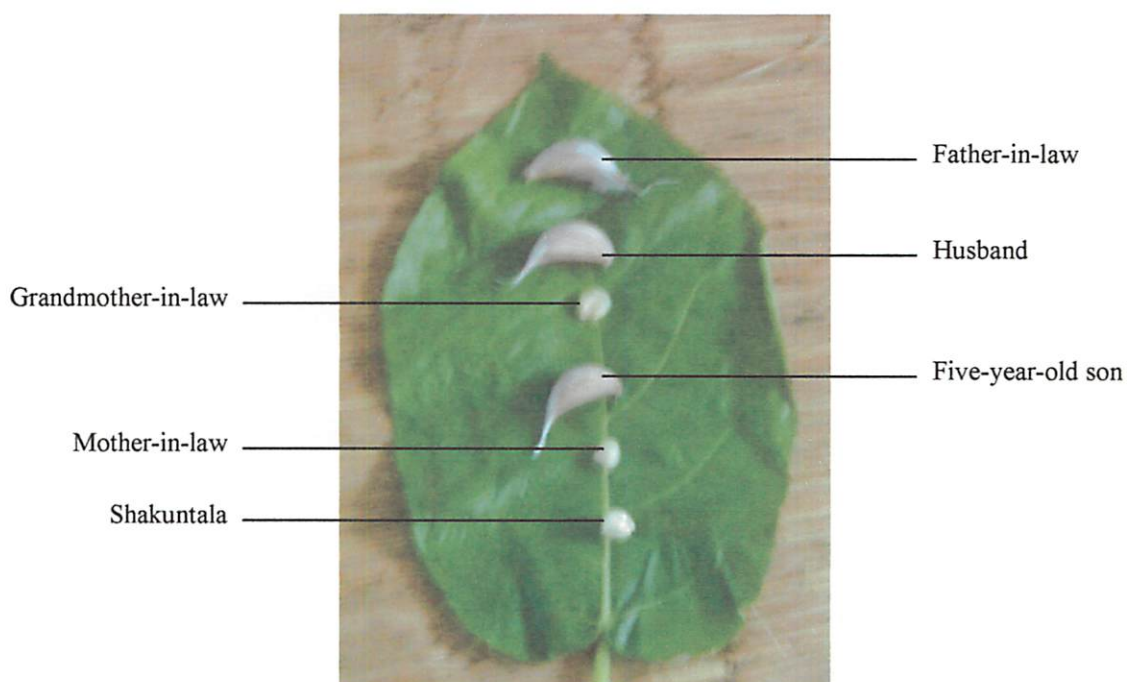


Fig.2. A high caste household's diagram made by a high caste woman

This diagram reflects the strong belief in the Hindu patrilineal ideology of high caste households where men who maintain lineage continuity are placed at the core, and women who are lineage outsiders are placed at the periphery of the household hierarchy. In high caste households, gender hierarchy transcends generations to an extent that women perceive themselves to rank lower than their grandsons.

This low status of high caste women in the households grounded in the Hindu patrilineal ideology is enforced with the daily purity-impurity codes of conduct. High caste women ideally regard their husbands as living gods and treat them likewise. One manifestation is the foot-washing ceremony; a wife's daily washing of her husband's feet. In this ceremony, before a woman can eat anything in the morning she must drink the water that falls from her husband's feet and then touch her forehead to his hands and feet as a gesture of worship, respect, and obedience (Ahearn 2001:23). Several high caste women and men told me that this water is considered to be pure for wives and possess magical powers for their longevity.

The purity-impurity codes are also significantly reflected in minute details in cooking and serving the two daily meals; women's work that takes at least three hours a day. A woman, most often the daughter-in-law, must purify herself before entering the kitchen, the most sacred area of the house. Fetching water, cutting vegetables, and cooking the staple food: *dal-baht* (lentil curry and boiled rice), requires the performance of meticulous rules. When the food is cooked, she serves her senior male kin first. After they finish eating, she serves her junior male kin, and then her female kin. Only after all her household members have finished their food, she eats what is left from her

husband's used plate. The reason why she must not eat nor taste the food until all her household members have finished their food is because, "she would be polluted by the contact between food and the saliva of her own mouth, and if she again touched the food then it would become *jutho* or polluted and hence inedible for all members of the family" (Bennet 1983:42).

These deferential daily rituals and practices oblige high caste women to be in a subordinate position to high caste men. Nevertheless, high caste women also benefit from their husband's high status, because they are identified with them, despite the fact their husbands act as rulers over them.

Low Caste Households

Maya Bika (33 years old, L village) belongs to a low caste household which consists of nine members of three generations. Figure 3 is the household diagram made by herself. The concept and method of making the structure is the same as figure 2.

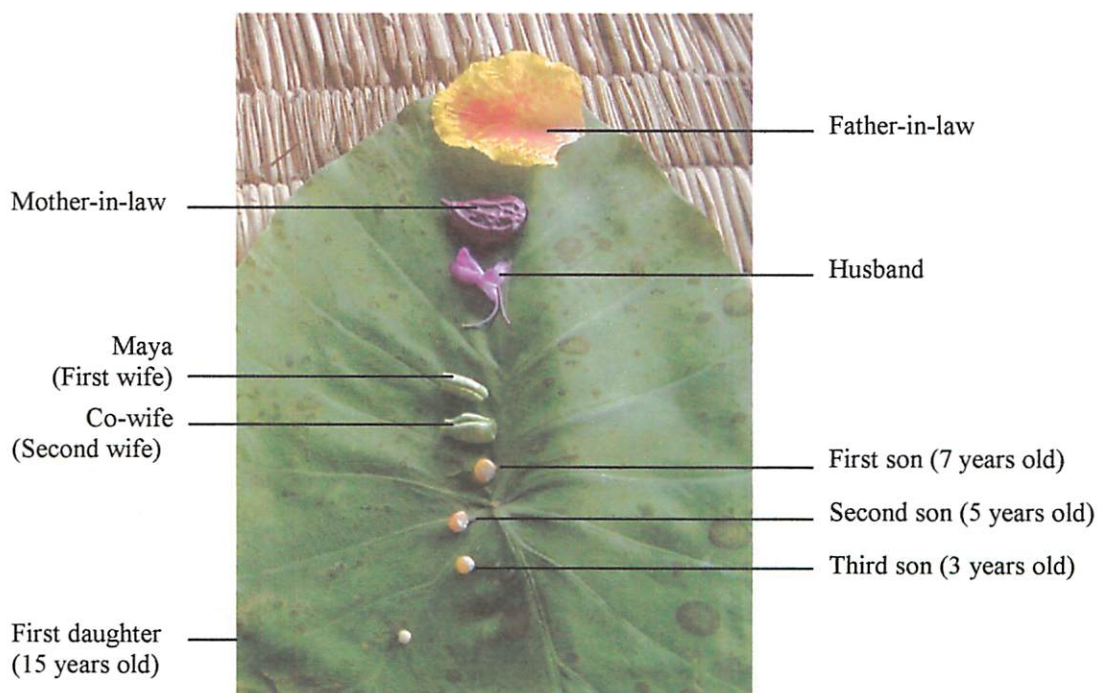


Fig.3. A low caste household's diagram made by a low caste woman

husband's used plate. The reason why she must not eat nor taste the food until all her household members have finished their food is because, "she would be polluted by the contact between food and the saliva of her own mouth, and if she again touched the food then it would become *jutho* or polluted and hence inedible for all members of the family" (Bennett 1983:42).

These differential daily rituals and practices obligate high caste women to be in a subordinate position to high caste men. Nevertheless, high caste women also benefit from their husband's high status, because they are identified with them, despite the fact their husbands act as rulers over them.

Low Caste Households

Maya Bika (33 years old, a village) belongs to a low caste household which consists of nine members of three generations. Figure 3 is the household diagram made by herself. The concept and method of making the structure is the same as figure 2.

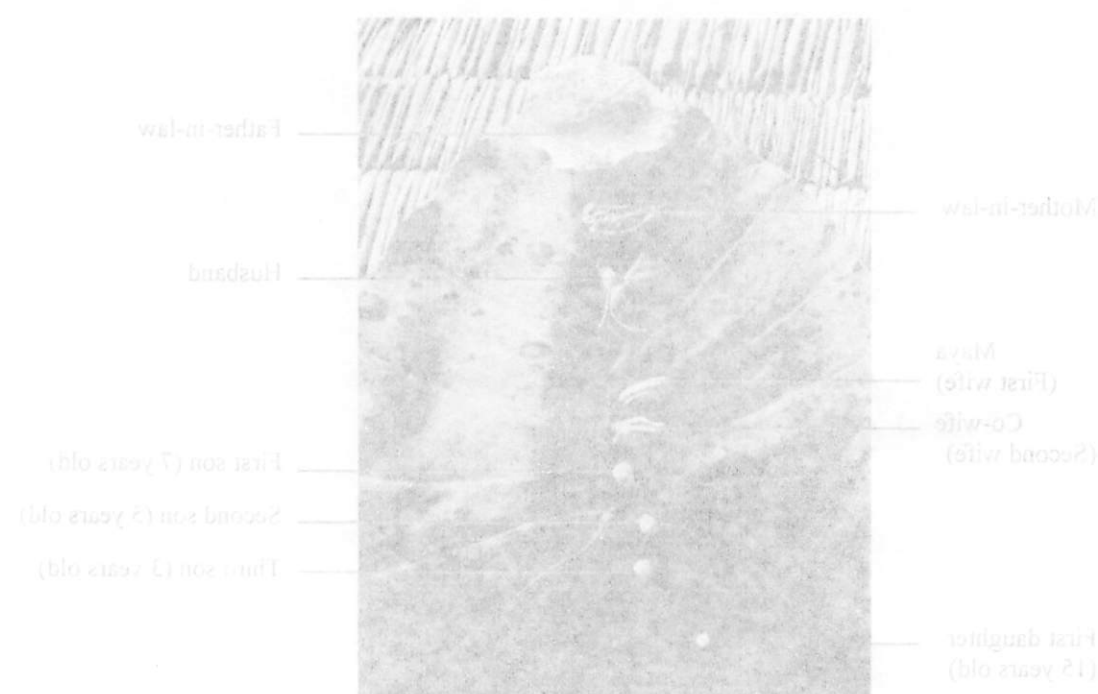


Fig. 3. A low caste household's diagram made by a low caste woman

Maya ranked her nine household members in a descending order: her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, her husband, herself, her co-wife, first son, second son, third son, and first daughter. Similarly to high caste households, all household members are positioned in a straight line hierarchy that either ranks oneself higher or lower than another household member with no equal standing. However, she gave a supplementary explanation that she and her co-wife have nearly equal standing, and her only daughter is lowest because she is working outside the house and is not together with the rest of the family.

The major difference discerned between high caste households is that low caste women are inserted in the hierarchy in a secondary position to their husbands, or brothers; thus, they have a more egalitarian relationship with them and are not necessarily positioned at the bottom of the household hierarchy. Her father-in-law is in the highest position, and is the patriarch, but the secondary position is not her husband but her mother-in-law. Her husband ranks lower than his mother, likewise the three sons of the co-wife rank lower than their mother. Children are ranked according to gender then age, the three sons, rank higher than the first daughter.

This diagram indicates that the gender hierarchy of low caste households applies within the generation but does not transcend to a younger generation. This indicates that the Hindu patrilineal ideology has less influence in their household hierarchy, and women have more parity with their male kin. When asked the reason for their preference of sons over daughters, low caste women explain that their sons are their economic security for their old age; whereas high caste women explain both economic security and religious value.

Low caste women's relative parity with their male kin is demonstrated in gendered daily

practices. First, although low caste women's interaction with their husbands is with obedience, respect, and deference, they do not ideally regard their husbands as living gods. This is because their caste status itself is perceived to be impure; low caste men do not embody divinity. Low caste women do not perform the daily foot-washing ceremony either. As for meals, far less restrictions are enforced. For instance, members of the low caste household eat together at the same time. Several low caste women told me, "It is the happiest time of the day. After a hard day of work, I cook food and eat together with my family." Moreover, if their husband and/or father-in-law returns late, low caste women can eat before them.

These fewer social and behavioral restrictions grant low caste women relatively more freedom and autonomy compared to high caste women within the household. Nevertheless, an unequal structure of gender relationships in the household is undeniable, and once low caste women are out of the household, they are dominated not only by their male kin, but by high caste men and women as well.

Different Worlds between High Caste Women and Low Caste Women

As discussed high caste women and low caste women live in extremely different worlds. These different worlds' leads to differentiation in gender relations, where greater equality exists between women and men of low castes compared to high castes within their respective households. This fact is further enforced by two practical aspects that differentiates high caste and low caste households.

The first aspect is the difference in landholding and inheritance. High caste households own land, the property of their lineage, and at the same time, the most important village resource for

subsistence. High caste men inherit land, a material basis for their authority, whereas, high caste women are structurally excluded from it, compelling their subordination to their male kin. Low caste households hardly own land. Landlessness diminishes the power of lower caste males because the material basis for their authority is absent (Cameron 1998). Low caste men and women inherit artisan skills which are not a zero-sum game; granting women to make a stand that is not fully subordinate to their male kin.

The second aspect is the difference in occupation. High caste households, especially in households that belong to Hindu priests, women are strongly associated with the gender values of the patriline and purity-impurity codes. This restricts them in their work, and deprives their opportunities for outside employment. Low caste households are occupational castes, gender values of the patriline and purity-impurity codes are shadowed by the fact that both wives and husbands are trained artisans, and often work together to produce a commodity or labor for high caste households in order to gain income.

Thus, these two economic realities, absence of land inheritance and women's visible economic contribution toward the households, results in a far less gender hierarchy between women and men of the low caste.

4.6.3. Women's Gendered Identity

Women's gendered identity in LK, regardless of caste, is that both women and men perceive women to be an inferior person compared to men. All women and men, both high caste and low caste, whom I interviewed, described women's relative powerlessness compared to men. When asked about the difference in men and women, women's unanimous remarks were "Men can do

anything, but women can not do anything.” Lack of power in themselves is engraved into women themselves and to the society itself, to an extent that women are defined as an incompetent being.

This statement: “men can do anything, but women can not do anything”, was repeated again and again by women, despite the fact that in reality, women work more than their male counterparts and women accomplish their “triple roles: reproductive work, productive work, and community managing work” (Moser 1993), by using various types of knowledge and skills. What this indicates is the fact that women are neither happy nor satisfied with their role or with their relationships in the society.

Furthermore, these words reflect women’s consciousness on power they desire but can not acquire. “Women can not do anything” implies their vivid sense of oppression over their actions. However, “women can not do anything” also connotes their desire of doing something by their own will. Because women want to do something but are forbidden to do it, their feelings of powerlessness is repeatedly shaped into these words. The power of doing something as one wants to do, for women of LK, is inherent in men, not women.

4.7. Low Caste Women

As demonstrated in the previous two sections, the position of LK low caste women is designated at the bottom rungs of the two major hierarchies in the LK society: caste and gender. Low caste women bear the impurity of both caste and the female sex, although their relative impurity compared with low caste men is less than that of high caste men and women. Nevertheless, whilst their visible economic roles are integral to sustain LK economy, the superordinate group, high caste men and women, and their counterpart low caste men, practice

power over low caste women, which low caste women are expected to defer to.

LK low caste women's existence on the margin of the society marks their powerlessness. However, I want to point out two aspects. First, this does not mean that they are isolated or secluded from the society itself. In the everyday lives of low caste women, one's caste and gender symbolically and pragmatically constitute innumerable exchanges with others (Cameron 1998:3). Second, they are not mere passive victims in the society and fully submit or consent to their position. In their reality, they possess a feeling of unfairness and see contradictions in the purity-impurity codes of conduct daily brandished towards them that organize and justify their subordination. When I asked a low caste woman directly about the oppositional concepts of purity and impurity she responded to me softly, but with discomfort in her facial expression: "The things that are offered by high caste people to god are '*suddha*' (ritually pure). The things that are going to be offered by low caste people to god are perceived '*asuddha*' (ritually impure) by high caste people. Even if we offer the same thing it is still '*asuddha*'. If we touch the things that have been offered by high caste people it also becomes '*asuddha*'. How can we believe in such things?" As in this narrative, LK low caste women often described their critical doubts of purity-impurity codes and showed their resistance in the way they are defined by others.

Thus, I argue that LK low caste women, although in an outward appearance they are subordinate players in the society, within themselves they possess different values that both accept and reject their subordination. Moreover, the rapid social change surging into LK has strengthened a counter-ideology of their society they live in. This is especially conspicuous when low caste women talk about their children. I have never come across a low caste woman who does not hope for better lives and less caste-based and/or gender-based discrimination for their children, especially

for their beloved daughters, compared to their own invidious lives.

4.8. Social Change

LK, as elsewhere in Nepal, has been experiencing a rapid social change after the 1990 People's Movement that ushered in a democratic system of the government. Arrival of this new democratic era has brought radical changes at all levels of the society affecting many arenas of life in Nepal. In the case of LK, three significant outside forces of change have contributed to a shift in people's power and position in the society. I outline these ongoing changes in LK with the focus on LK low caste women.

The first outside force of change is the monetization of economy. As reliance on cash has become increasingly important than land in people's livelihood, the self-circulation system among caste groups that had sustained the village based agrarian economy has begun to deteriorate. Male migration to urban areas or to the plain Tarai area in Nepal, or to foreign countries mainly to India, has become an indisputable trend. Mainly, high caste men move out for education or for salaried employment, whereas low caste men move out for survival, and undertake any available job offered, in most cases manual labor. The rate of male migration as a whole is higher in low caste households compared to high caste households due to the fact that low caste households have less income source opportunities in LK and are at the verge of subsistence. Almost all LK low caste households have experienced male migration and the male population within the age range of 15 to 40 is literally gone. This long term major absence in male labor has been absorbed by low caste women; heaving up their workloads to an extent they often lack sleep. However, male absence has also provided low caste women the opportunity to be managers of their household work including

negotiation with their patron high caste households. Some low caste women have taken advantage of this new role and have succeeded in transforming their patron-client relationship to a land lend-land rent relationship, loosening dependency towards high caste households. Today, more and more low caste women who have been left behind in LK, have started to take the initiative in renting land from high caste households and paying back by harvest shares and cash, rather than directly working on high caste people's lands under their close supervision as agriculture laborers. This has enhanced them to take control over basic resources leading them to have more control over their lives.

The second outside force of change is development. The salience of development in Nepali national society cannot be overemphasized: the idea of development grips the social imagination at the same time its institutional forms are shaping the society itself (Pigg 1996:172). Development projects, many of which have been in existence for half a century or more in Nepal, carry with them not only new agricultural, educational, or social practices; they also disseminate new ways of speaking, thinking, being, and behaving (Ahearn 2001:8). In LK, as various development projects began to be widely implemented from the mid-1990's by both government and non-governmental organizations, the work '*bikas*' (development) has permeated into the society and is used in daily conversations as something from outside their village that brings people forward. Participation in development projects, make a person '*bikasi*' (people who are developed). High caste men and women, who have opportunities to participate in development projects bring status and prestige to their households as a 'developed' standing. These high caste people distinguish themselves from the poor 'backward' people, who follow 'undeveloped' lives, indicating their difference from low caste people who are generally excluded from these development projects.

This disadvantages low caste women and men since they are stigmatized in yet another different social ranking: inexperience in development activities.

The third outside force of change is a new set of ideas on people as political actors. LK residents, keen to pursue values and behaviors that will embody themselves into the changing society, have started to think and talk about human rights, freedom, equality, and power to the people. Three aspects are specifically notable that has brought about this change. First, outside people, who have been educated in the democratic system, are flowing in and out of LK. Local politicians, government officers, NGO workers, alike continuously circulate democratic values on people's rights and obligations in forms of speeches, meetings, trainings, publications, and media. Second, social movements organized by local people themselves are occurring. People are voicing their demands and questioning their relatively powerless positions. One incident that took place in a nearby village in LK in 1998 has been renowned as a remarkable social procession in the district. Low caste people, men and women together, marched into a Hindu temple they had been forbidden to approach and worshipped: an act of protest towards caste discrimination. At that time, this kind of protest was an exceptional event. Today, it is an occasional phenomenon. Third, the Maoist movement as a fight for social justice to liberate people from caste, class, and gender barriers, ring in LK residents' ears. Maoists freely walk through LK, and whether armed or disarmed, they are accommodated in LK people's houses for food, shelter, and exchange of information. These new set of ideas on people as political actors have marked an emergence in people's perception on the politics of caste and gender in their society, turning down open stigmatization towards women, and low caste women and men, enforcing people to treat them in a more humane way than before.

During this one and a half decades after the arrival of democracy, LK residents have

constantly struggled to adjust to this new social world that has been brought from outside: the monetization of the economy, development, and a new set of ideas on people as political actors. As monetization of the economy has altered the form of wealth from land to cash, people start to rely more on outside; particularly development is seen as a lifeline to connect them to the outside world. Increasingly, the apparatus of *bikas* (the burgeoning of office jobs, the money brought in by foreign aid, the positions of influence in the bureaucracy) is the source of power, wealth, and upward social mobility (Pigg 1992:511). People actively engage themselves in development to gain these opportunities. Furthermore, “they figure they gain the advantage by becoming an agent of *bikas* rather than one of its targets” (Pigg 1992:511), which leads them to change themselves from silent villagers to political actors. These three outside forces, reinforce each other and create an alternative social order from the local order. In this collective struggle, a foundation for accepting and creating social change has been gradually nurtured in LK. In relevance to low caste women, they are experiencing a shift in their power and autonomy, from high caste households and low caste men in order to make a living. They are now in a position to take more central roles in the society. As will be described in the next chapter, association with one development project was enough for this transition.

CHAPTER 5 Empowerment of Low Caste Women in LK, Parbat

5.1. Analytical Framework

This chapter deals with the central question of this ethnography: what does empowerment mean to LK low caste women in Parbat, Nepal? To begin with, I introduce the analytical framework, the challenge faced in cultural translation, and uncover the cultural meanings of the two analytical concepts that revealed notions of empowerment of LK low caste women.

The starting point for developing the analytical framework, interweaving theory and practice, was to investigate LK low caste women's perception on changes before and after their participation in the Leadership and Livelihood Improvement Project (LLIP) implemented from 1999 to 2004. There are two reasons why I set out tracing LK low caste women's perception on changes. The first reason is theoretical. Empowerment is an idea of process, or change from a condition of disempowerment; therefore, empowerment needs to be captured dynamically not statically. The second reason is practical. Through participation of LLIP, low caste women would often unanimously say to each other, to my colleagues, and to myself "We have changed a lot", "Many things have changed" in a lively and positive sense. Moreover, as low caste women's autonomy increased in managing the project itself, changes became more and more visible. They started to become agents of change "by sharing their problems and seeking their own solutions by pooling their own resources, obtaining external help from different governmental and non-governmental organizations, and participating actively in decision-making processes that shape their lives as individuals and as members of households and the local polity" (cf. UNDP 2002). This new phenomenon of LK low caste women has been continuing even after the project phase. I argue that

these narratives, behaviors, and actions, related to low caste women's changes symbolize their internalization process of empowerment initially facilitated from outside.

As will become apparent in the narratives in the sections that follow, in relation to these significant changes before and after their encounter to development, LK low caste women were using their own words to depict their transformation: *aatmaa* (inner mind)¹ and *aatma* (self). When I first noticed them using these words and referred it to Durga Adhikari, director of my counterpart NGO; he gasped in amaze, "I never thought they would express their changes using such apt words!" Gradually, I realized that *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self), their language of empowerment had been shared across low caste women and was continuously discussed in their local context, especially in their regular group meetings. LK low caste women had collectively engendered and conceptualized their changes by using their own words embedded in their society.²

Thus, to explore empowerment from the viewpoint of low caste women was to examine in detail their perception on changes through their language of empowerment: *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self). In other words, *aatmaa* and *aatma* serve as a pair of glasses into their new experience. I identify the two terms to be the two analytical concepts that reveal notions of empowerment of low caste women in LK. Consequently, the biggest challenge in this ethnography became the task of cultural translation of low caste women's narratives surrounding *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self). Narrowing down interpretation became crucial. As Ahearn notes, "Although people might come up with an infinite number of possible interpretations of any discursive event, by examining many different kinds of social and textual evidence the anthropologist should be able to rule out some of these interpretations and identify emergent patterns that might constitute new structures of feelings" (Ahearn 2001:56). Therefore, to generate a sufficient understanding of potential

meanings and to identify the range of interpretation of LK low caste women's narratives, I discuss here in various perspectives the two analytical concepts that are central to this study: *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self).

5.1.1. Analytical Concepts: *Aatmaa* & *Aatma*

Aatmaa and *aatma*, these two Nepali terms are originally interrelated concepts that have derived from the Sanskrit term *aatman*. *Aatman* is one of the fundamental principles of Hindu philosophy and signifies the inner essence of the individual as well as the universe. The Hindu belief is that the individual self or soul reincarnates through cycles of life and death until it is joined with the universal soul and attains enlightenment. According to Deussen the primal meaning of *aatman* is breath, soul, and self; however, it is pointed out that *aatman* in the sense of breath occurs only in four passages of the Rigveda, mostly in hymns of younger date, thus, the meaning of *aatman* has developed to denote soul and self (Deussen 2000:221).

Schmidt describes *aatmaa* as soul, spirit, and *aatma* as self, pertaining to the self (Schmidt 1993:36). Both are nouns. The given example for *aatmaa* is *aatmaa amar char* (the soul is immortal), and for *aatma* is *aatma-kathaa* (self-biography) (*ibid.*). *Aatmaa* ends with a vowel (aa) ensuing the pronunciation of *aatmaa* to end with an a-sound, whereas *aatma* ends with a consonant (ma) and ends with an o-sound. Therefore, although *aatmaa* and *aatma* share etymology, the two terms are different in meaning, spelling, and pronunciation, and are distinguished in Nepali language.

I turn now to examples of usages of *aatmaa* and *aatma* in LK in order to examine how these concepts are used and understood in LK everyday life.

***Aatmaa* in LK**

When asked out of the blue, what *aatmaa* is, LK residents often replied as in dictionaries “soul”. A common phrase containing *aatmaa* in this sense in LK is “even when one is dead, *aatmaa* (soul) does not die”. This saying symbolizes the Hindu belief in the transmigration of *aatmaa* (soul) and possesses religious significance. It is generally used in a loss of life situation and consoles people by reminding them that though the flesh will perish *aatmaa* (soul) will remain even after one’s death. Here the term *aatmaa* is used in a religious context, and signifies the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being.

In ordinary talk in LK, however, the term *aatmaa* is referred as a worldly and tangible existence inside an individual that contains one’s feelings and/or one’s thoughts. LK residents explain that one’s *aatmaa* influences one’s self. When one feels negative emotions and/or possesses negative thoughts, such as sadness, fear, incompetence to do something, one’s *aatmaa* deflates, and makes oneself negative and enervating. When one feels positive emotions and/or possesses positive thoughts, such as happiness, love, or competence to do something, one’s *aatmaa* inflates, and makes oneself positive and activating. This usage of *aatmaa* differs from its usage as “soul” a deity existence out of human control.

As an example of *aatmaa* in this sense, I draw on a conversation with a low caste woman about how her *aatmaa* is related to her feelings and her self. “When I go to work to (my patron) high caste household, they throw a stool outside the courtyard for me to sit. I feel sad, oh very sad, although I do not show my sadness. At that time, my *aatmaa* becomes small. I feel I am still in a low position... But when my husband sends money (from India). I feel very happy. I feel

reassured. My *aatmaa* becomes big. I know he is well, and I know I can live with my children here.” What she is indicating is that her sadness that is triggered by caste-based discrimination deflates her *aatmaa*, and this in turn influences her to consider herself to be an inferior being. In contrast, her happiness and reassurance that results from her husband’s remittance inflates her *aatmaa*, and this in turn influences her to consider herself able to survive and nurture her family. Her *aatmaa* is responding to her feelings and influencing her self.

I argue that the closest translation of *aatmaa* that contains one’s feelings and/or one’s thoughts that influences one’s self is “inner mind”.³ *Aatmaa* as inner mind interacts with self, others, internal and external events, which are occurring in present life, and again relates to one’s feelings and/or one’s thoughts, and constructs one self. When asked where one’s *aatmaa* (inner mind) is, LK residents points to their heart. Although *aatmaa* as inner mind is not gender-marked, I more often heard it used in this sense by women rather than men.

Thus, the term *aatmaa* has different meanings in LK: soul and inner mind. Consequently, when *aatmaa* is used, discerning the context, whether it is religious or secular, is absolutely crucial to identify the range of interpretation. Furthermore, when *aatmaa* is used as inner mind, a sufficient understanding of people’s feelings and/or thoughts, and how people perceive themselves, is required to gain comprehension of what is being expressed.

***Aatma* in LK**

I now turn to illuminate the term *aatma* in LK everyday life. When asked what *aatma* is, many LK residents gave a vague answer, and some did not distinguish *aatma* (self) from *aatmaa* (inner mind). “*Aatma* and *aatmaa* are same. It is in here” some explained pointing at their heart.

However, LK residents do not use these two terms interchangeably, and choose the appropriate term that suits the situation in which they are describing. Thus, as people themselves are subconsciously differentiating these two different terms, I argue that these two terms although not distinct entities are different in meaning.

As in dictionaries, *aatma* is used as a term of self-reference in LK. A feature of *aatma* is that it is not a common term as *aatmaa* in LK. As a high caste man remarked, “*Aatma* is a word more often used by ‘developed’ people.” Few people could articulate the meaning of *aatma* in LK; all who could were those who had completed college education in town areas, a rare experience in which villagers perceive to make the person developed. Another feature of *aatma* is that it is invariably used in compounds, not just by the term alone. Common compounds of *aatma* I heard in LK were *aatma-bal* (inner power) and *aatma-sammana* (self-respect).

Aatma-bal (inner power) is used in a situation when a person himself/herself uses his/her own *bal* (power) by his/her own will and initiates action according to his/her will unaided. It is often used in times of hardship when a person needs to overcome the crisis by himself/herself. For example, a high caste man explained to me that, “Suppose I am wounded and paralyzed. If I have *aatma-bal*, recovery is easy. If I do not have *aatma-bal*, recovery is late.” When I asked why, he answered with a gleam in his eyes, “If I have *aatma-bal*, I have the will power to recover. So I exercise in order to recover. But if I do not have *aatma-bal*, I do not have the will power to recover. I just lie in bed and suffer.” This example indicates that *aatma-bal* is perceived to be an individual’s faculty that determines and controls one’s own actions.

Aatma- sammana (self-respect) is used in a situation when a person recognizes and values his/her own *sammana* (inherent dignity) inside oneself, or other’s *sammana* (inherent dignity) inside

others self. It is often quoted in a moral sense from a perspective of defending and advocating human rights: an omnipresent principle in the rapid social change of LK. For example, a high caste woman who is the sole female teacher in the only high school in L village described how she teaches her students this term. “When boys who belong to the high caste families bully a girl from the low caste family, I tell the boys not to do so because everybody has *aatma-sammana*.” Here the teacher is reasoning her high caste male students to appreciate the dignity in a low caste female student. When I asked whether there is a different amount of *aatma-sammana* according to one’s social ranking, she laughed and answered, “No, no. Everybody has the same *aatma-sammana* which can not be deprived.” This example indicates that *aatma-sammana* is perceived to be an inherent equal dignity and an inalienable right in every person, without distinction of any kind such as caste, gender, age, property, education, or any other status.

Through analysis of these two examples: *aatma-bal* (inner power) and *aatma-sammana* (self-respect), *aatma* can be dissected as self; one’s own self, the executive or cognitive self. The common factor of *aatma* in both examples is that is it used to assert one’s individuality that is distinguished to be a separate existence from others and is used to suggest one’s autonomy in one’s feelings and/or thoughts, and actions. Thus, it is conceivable that one’s *aatma* (self) influences one’s *aatmaa* (inner mind). For instance, when one’s *aatma* (self) has *bal* (power) or *sammana* (respect), one feels positive emotions or positive thoughts inducing one’s *aatmaa* (inner mind) to inflate.

Aatmaa and Aatma in LK

As discussed, *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) are correlated entities, and share a

fundamental quality as inherent in an individual person in LK. The cultural relationship of *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) in LK can be described as Figure 4.

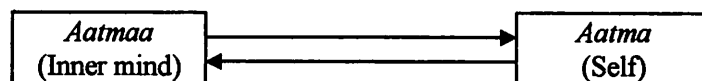


Fig.4. Cultural relationship between *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) in LK

Difference between *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) becomes decisive according to one's standpoint. When *aatmaa* (inner mind) is the standpoint, *aatmaa* (inner mind) is perceived to be acting on *aatma* (self); *aatma* (self) is decentered. In contrast, when *aatma* (self) is the standpoint, *aatma* (self) influences one's feelings and/or one's thoughts, thus influencing *aatmaa* (inner mind); *aatma* (self) is in the center. Grammatical usage corroborates this difference. When *aatmaa* (inner mind) is discussed, *aatmaa* (inner mind) is the subject, and the corresponding personal pronouns are possessive. For example, "my *aatmaa*", "your *aatmaa*", "his/her *aatmaa*" is the appropriate usage. When *aatma* (self) is discussed, the corresponding personal pronouns are subjective. As *aatma* (self) is only used in compounds, the *aatma*-compound is seen as a possession of the individual. For example, "I have *aatma*-compound", "You have *aatma*-compound", "He/She has *aatma*-compound" is the appropriate usage. Thus, when comparison between *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) is made, *aatmaa* (inner mind) can be seen to be associated with less autonomy whereas *aatma* (self) more autonomy over oneself.

5.2. Exploring Empowerment

I now turn to explore LK low caste women's narratives on empowerment, their perception

on changes before and after their participation in LLIP, through their language of empowerment: *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self). This analysis has led to the intimate realm of LK low caste women's notions of empowerment, in three interrelated domains: their self, their household, and their village. I delve into these narratives according to each domain. In doing so, I attempt to dissect out an anatomy of how LK low caste women relate to the concept of empowerment, what new feelings and thoughts are emerging from them, what new attitudes and actions are appearing from them, and how the process was internalized. I further examine how their changes have influenced kinship, caste and gender relationships operating in their social system. Finally, I derive a model of their empowerment and explore why a group of marginalized women could change their roles and relationships with others when it is against the dominant social norms and practices, and what do these changes reveal and ramify. But before this analysis, a brief sketch of the LLIP which triggered their changes is needed.

5.2.1. Leadership and Livelihood Improvement Project

The major goal of the Leadership and Livelihood Improvement Project (LLIP) was to empower low caste women in five villages of Parbat District including LK, through improving their social and economic status, thus enabling them to become agents of change in developing them self, their households, and their communities. This project was initially designed by two NGOs: one Japanese NGO with which I had worked as a project coordinator throughout the project phase, and a local Nepalese NGO. The project phase was from September 1999 to August 2004. From September 2002, the project was more managed by the local NGO and low caste women themselves. Over the five year project, approximately 150 low caste women participated in the project activities.

From 2001 onward, high caste women, although a handful, also joined in some of the project activities. Low caste and high caste men also popped in and out of project activities.

The major project activities were 1) group formation, 2) micro-credit, 3) leadership training, and 4) kitchen gardening and agroforestry. The contents of group formation was to make two to three autonomous self-help groups in each village, with ten to fifteen women in each group. In these groups, women were encouraged to share their feelings and thoughts, everyday concerns, and learn about their social environment. The group met on a weekly or monthly basis, and as organizational skills were nurtured, group members began to identify their needs and potentials, make action plans that reflect their needs, and take collective actions to implement the plan. These groups simultaneously formed a micro-credit scheme, and members began to save money as a group regularly. This money in turn was provided as a loan to group members for activities that generate income, which was repaid by small weekly installments. Leadership training was inserted during the agricultural off-season, where women learned about women's rights, human rights, gender equality, caste situations, etc. that will enhance their knowledge to participate in decision-making processes. Study tours outside the village where women could network with other women's groups were also organized. Kitchen gardening and agroforestry trainings were implemented yearly, in order to improve food self-sufficiency and to secure firewood and fodder, essential resources in their daily life.

The major achievement of the project was enabling women at both individual and collective levels to build their capacity to take more control over their lives and to take actions they wished to take in institutions that mattered to them. Especially groups became a hub of change, women from different caste groups of the low caste and the high caste, discarded caste-based and

gender-based discrimination towards each other and formed a sense of unity, which led to collective social action that reflected their interests.

5.2.2. Changes in Self

As an example of how LK low caste women described changes in their self: empowerment at the individual domain, I introduce excerpts of three interviews with them. These narratives encompass low caste women's alternative views of their self that counteract the dominant 'women can not do anything' image so prevalent in LK that actuates women and the society to view women as powerless and incapable beings, placing them in a submissive role to their male counterparts. In these narratives we see a new consciousness of LK low caste women's self-understanding repeatedly imagined and formed within and against the society, on who they are and what they can do, intrinsically motivating them to act according to their alternative self. These changes have not only influenced themselves intrapersonally, but also interactionally in kinship, gender and caste relationships that surround them.

Ms. Kesha Kumari Darjee (39 years old, K village)

I start from an excerpt of an interview with Ms. Kesha Kumari Darjee, who opened this study with her poem. She, a leader of one of the low caste women's group in K village, arose to a national women's leader in a micro-credit national network in 2005. A vivid memory of her in 1999, during the initial phase of the LLIP, was when Kesha, already an active volunteer worker, and I were trotting back home in the dusk after a long day of work, visiting other low caste women in K village to talk about their lives and to invite them to a group meeting. Since she seemed so

enthusiastic in encouraging other low caste women to participate in 'development', I casually asked her "How would you like to see your village in the near future?" No sooner did I ask, she impassively replied "My head is full of buffalo dung. How would I know?" These words not only haunted me for years, but the tone in which she mentioned it as if it was something trifling opened my eyes to low caste women's inferiority, self-deprecation, and low self-esteem engraved in their minds. The interview starts from recalling this scene.

FY⁴: Why did you say something like that? I mean who told you that?

KKD⁵: Nobody told me. But I thought I couldn't do anything. I have six children. I can not do anything. I always thought that I am a very small person who can not do anything. Most Nepali women have the same concept, but not now.

FY: Why did women think like that?

KKD: Before? We Nepali?

FY: Yes, yes.

KKD: Before, we Nepali women were thinking that only men can do something, but we women can not do anything... except raising children and doing household work.

FY: From when did you start to think like that?

KKD: From my childhood. We have learned that women can not do anything and women should not do anything. We were following our ancestor's principle.

FY: Who teaches you this?

KKD: Father and mother both. From their feelings... They are also practicing the same.

Kesha is attributing responsibility to her own parents and in a wider sense to her society, on how from childhood she has shaped her self understanding as a worthless being because she is a woman. She explains how the idea of men being more capable than women of taking effective action has formed naturally inside her by gathering other people's feelings rather than by explained explicitly by words. Moreover, she describes how this constrained 'woman can not do anything' image leads to the women's submissive role in gender relationships. Reflecting on this constructed reality, she now turns to how she has changed as a leader by transforming her image of self.

FY: But then, how did you change?

KKD: When you were here, and when you gave us training, we [low caste women] realized that we can also do something and we can also learn something.

FY: What did you learn?

KKD: Before, I didn't know anything. But during these seven years, I have learned that to achieve something we have to loose something.

FY: What did you gain and what did you lose?

KKD: I lost time, but I gained knowledge. I lost time, but I gained love from you...

Now I know how to be familiar with other people. Now I can take leadership and handle the community...I want to set an example to other women. What I have achieved, others can also achieve. I want to teach other women that we should act for ourselves as well as for others. If we want to give light to others, we have to be bright.

FY: That's true...

KKD: But sometimes there are difficulties while we are working. We should have patience when there are difficulties.

FY: Yes! For example....?

KKD: When I was attending training and meetings, other villagers were thinking that I would become a harlot. At that time, my husband was [a migrant worker] in Qatar and I was having small children. People were thinking I would go [and have a relationship] with another man. But I didn't take this matter as a big thing.

FY: Why did you think like that?

KKD: When I heard this gossip, I felt very bad. But once we get afraid of these things....if I haven't done any mistake, I should not be afraid. Nobody can blame me; I took this in my heart. I realized from training that I have to be strong. I also have to show them from my *aatma-bal* [inner power].

FY: What do you mean?

KKD: I have *attma-bal* [inner power] [placing her hand to her heart]. Though I am uneducated and am a woman, now I can do something, which I could prove.

Kesha stresses that participation in training and meetings that enabled her to acquire love and knowledge from outside was the tipping point of her change. This experience has transformed her self image: 'women can not do anything' image to a 'women can do something' image: strong and capable being who can influence her life and the future of the village as well. Portraying this alternative self image on herself, she uses her *attma-bal* (inner power) in order to makes efforts to

take actions that conform to her new self image. She points out that now she has developed leadership skills that enable her to interact with villagers in a different way than before, building rapport with each other, giving advice to women, and being actively involved in village activities. This she remarks could not have been done by an uneducated low caste woman before.

Ms. Pabitra B.K. (53 years old, L village)

Ms. Pabitra B.K., a quick-witted woman of L village, reflects on changes in herself as follows.

FY: How did you start to participate in group meetings?

PBK: In the beginning, other [low caste] women encouraged me to participate in their group meetings. They said, “Your opinions are good, so please come and share it with others”. Before, it was unthinkable for a low caste, on top of that a women to go to meetings, you know. I had hesitation. I was weak... I didn’t have *aatma-bal* [inner power].

FY: How did you feel after participating in group meetings?

PBK: Good... Very good! Before, oh...I was just like a mouse in a hole! Ah ha ha...

Now I can come out, can see, can understand, and gain knowledge. It is not good always to work inside the house. It is good to go for training and meetings. Even though I now am at the age of 53, I go to participate.

FY: [We both smile.] What has made you so active?

PBK: After attending many [group] meetings, my *aatmaa* [inner mind] gradually became

big. I began to feel strong. Now we [low caste women] are friends. We hold hands to overcome. Oh..., woman's hand is not just for rocking a child in a cradle, but if we are united, we can move the whole world! Now, I am surprised but I myself encourage other [low caste] women to join [group] meetings!

Pabitra explains that mutual assistance and interaction with other low caste women in training and meetings have inflated her *aatmaa* (inner mind) making her feel strong. This has emancipated her self image to be a trivial woman; in her own words, 'a mouse in a hole' with no *aatma-bal* (inner power), changing her gender views on a woman's role: a woman who can only work inside the house, to a woman who can gain knowledge and move the world with their own initiative if united. This understanding is based on her experience in group meetings where low caste women share their feelings and thoughts on equal terms, and training where she has acquired knowledge of women's rights and gender roles and relationships. She indicates her proactive attitudes encouraging other low caste women to participate in development activities that will engender potential changes.

Ms. Mira B.K. (28 years old, K village)

Ms. Mira B.K., a lively woman of K village, reflects on changes in herself as follows.

FY: What do you think is the biggest change in you?

MBK: Now I can speak. At the beginning, I had hesitation to talk with other villagers and also strangers. Before, I was like that. I didn't have the ability to speak in front

of even two people. I couldn't even speak my name.

FY: Yes, I remember. [We both smile.] Why could you not speak?

MBK: I had fear. Before, when somebody told me something, I could only feel it in my heart. I could not speak back. Now I can express myself. Now I can put my feelings into words, give my opinion and protect myself. Nobody can cheat me. Nobody can dominate me. [In this way] I could develop my *aatma-nibharra* [self-dependence]. My *aatma-bal* [inner power] is increasing.

FY: *Aatma-bal* means?

MBK: I am not afraid. If I am true, why am I afraid? [Now] I know women's rights and human rights, social rights also.

FY: What has made you think like this?

MBK: Training. After joining training, I could realize that I can do. Women also have the ability to do something. We are going forward now.

FY: So the training have influenced your changes?

MBK: Yes. After training, my *aatmaa* [inner mind] has become strong and big.

FY: *Aatmaa*? What is *aatmaa*?

MBK: *Aatmaa*?

FY: Yes, I want to know what *aatmaa* is. You said your *aatmaa* has become strong and big.

Other women also mentioned about their *aatmaa* in a similar way.

MBK: *Aatmaa*... *aatmaa* means inner mind. If our mind is strong, we can easily express what we want to say. But if our *aatmaa* is weak, we can not express. There is some fear.

FY: Oh, I see. *Aatmaa* is inner mind. The inner mind becomes strong. Is there anything else you can do when your *aatmaa* is strong?

MBK: Beyond capacity, I can not do for myself, but according to my full capacity I can do.

FY: Does it mean that if your *aatmaa* is weak, you can not do even if you have capacity?

MBK: No, I can not do.

FY: Why?

MBK: Due to fear, "What will happen?" This [kind of thought] will come to my mind.

Even if I know how to do, I can not do due to fear.

FY: So when your *aatmaa* is big, you do not have fear?

MBK: No. I have courage. Anything can be done [according to my full capacity]!

Mira explicitly explains how the training that had given her critical understanding of the social environment have removed her fear of the society inflating her *aatmaa* (inner mind) to be stronger. Out of this stronger *aatmaa* (inner mind), which she describes to be prerequisite to bring out her capacity, a new sense of *aatma* (self) is emerging, that is different from what she had possessed. She mentions that women do not have to be afraid if they know the 'truth', expressing her new thoughts on herself that are forming. This new self image is reflected in her *aatma-bal* (inner power) that enables her to realize her feelings and thoughts into action, thus actually practicing her capacity. As she proclaims, she can now speak out her own opinion in front of other villagers and protect herself, promoting her sense of *aatma-nibharra* (self-dependence). In turn, now, other villagers do not dominate nor cheat her. Repetition of this experience has not only changed her self image, but also her social image on how she is perceived by the society.

To conclude this section on LK low caste women's changes in their self: empowerment at the individual domain, I summarize the internalization process and consequences. Active participation in training and meetings has inflated LK low caste women's *aatmaa* (inner mind), and influenced their *aatma* (self) to possess a 'women can do something' image. As Wieringa points out, LK low caste women unanimously explained that "to de-code and to re-inscribe their own concept of themselves is a difficult and often painful process" (Wieringa 1994:834), since it needs consent of their *aatma* (self) and their social surroundings. However, as a new *aatma* (self) takes root in them, enabling them to perceive themselves as capable beings, *aatma-bal* (inner mind), a driving force that brings out their capacity and determines their actions according to their new *aatma* (self) develops inside them.

The consequences of this internalization process at the individual domain identified by LK low caste women were, disappearance of negative feelings such as fear and inferiority; arise of positive feelings such as courage, happiness, and competence; acquired knowledge of their social environment and nurtured ability of how to act in it, especially their ability to speak in order to define and defend their interests and needs in front of others. This intrapersonal change is related to interactional change, in which group identity and rapport among group members were built, enabling them to cast away caste discrimination among each other; discuss and make decisions together; and take organized action in order to meet their collective goals.

These intrapersonal changes and interactional changes have led LK low caste women to understand that they can change individually and collectively. Moreover, these changes that have led to low caste women's new *aatma* (self) have given a considerable ripple effect to their household

members, and to other village members, altering their views on them.

5.2.3. Changes in Household

When asked whether LK low caste women perceive any changes in their households since they themselves have changed, many of them gave me a wondering look, and some expressed it in their words in a matter of fact sense: “Why not? I have changed positively. How can my family remain unchanged?” This affirmed that low caste women consider it natural that changes in their individual domain should influence their household domain. As an example of how LK low caste women described their household changes, I introduce excerpts of two interviews with them. These narratives show LK low caste women’s alternative views, constructed within and against the household norms, on their household roles, relationships between household members, kinship and gender hierarchies, and reconstitute people’s relative position in it.

Ms. Harikala Darjee (31 years old, L village)

Ms. Harikala Darjee (age 31) is a member of a household that consists of her mother-in-law (age 74), husband (age 31), one son (age 13), and three daughters (age 8, 7, and 5) in L village. They are, as most other LK low caste households, farmers with insufficient resources for subsistence: a mere 1000 square meter non-irrigated land for millet, 1 buffalo, and 2 chickens, and are bound to three patron high caste households through economic need.

Whenever I visited Harikala’s house, which is located at the edge of the low caste and the high caste quarters in L village, it was often full of neighboring low caste women and children. I slowly came to see that they were not only there to chat, but to receive some maize, a pinch of sugar

or salt, a few chili's from her kitchen garden, or some advice from Harikala, although her household was in a similar economic situation as them. When I asked her, she replied, "They don't have anything. What [else] to do?"

This exposed not only her helpful attitude but also the fact that her other household members are acknowledging her to help others. However, she confided in me that she had struggled to create this household environment where she now has gained their acknowledgement for her to act more on her own initiative. In the following narrative, she reflects on her struggle for better conditions for herself and for her family that has led to these changes in her household.

HD: Before participating in the project, my husband was very strict with me. This was mainly because of my father in law [who lived together]. He gave suggestions to my husband to rule me. That is why he [my husband] always dominated me.

FY: How then did your husband change?

HD: After I participated in the [leadership and kitchen garden] training, I learned a lot from you and I could change my understanding. I learned that there should not be domination from woman to woman, and husband to wife also. I also learned about vegetables, how to do [kitchen gardening], how to eat. I thought this is good. My *aatmaa* [inner mind] became big... I started to teach my husband and children, and other women who did not know about these things. I also encouraged my husband to participate [in the next training]. I thought it would change him and it did.

FY: Can you elaborate on how your husband has changed?

HD: Before, he did not help me in household chores. Now, he gets up at 5:00 o'clock in

the mornings, the same time [as me] to help me. He feeds the buffalo while I clean the house and make tea. He has totally changed. He is very polite and shows respect to me. He is not strict even a tiny bit! [laughs shyly]

FY: That's nice. Are there any other changes?

HD: Before, my husband did not give permission to go out. Now I can go out freely.

Mother in law also [has the same attitude]...

FY: Why did your family members forbid you to go out?

HD: Before, whenever we spoke to other men [except our male-kin], they would get suspicious [that I am having a relationship with him]. Now, they have realized it is good to attend training, good to be in [women's] groups.

FY: How did they realize this?

HD: In the beginning they were unhappy. Many times I had to talk to them because they had a traditional concept. I explained what we are learning and what we are discussing is good [for this household]. I told them that even though we are low caste we should not be backward. We should go forward.

FY: What about your children?

HD: Oh, [now] my children also show their respect to me. Before, they referred to me as 'ta' [the most demeaning title of 'you' that is commonly used for small children and animals in LK], but now they address me as 'tapai' [the most honorific title of 'you' commonly used for people higher in social status or older than the speaker in LK]. They are obedient and kind to me too. Now I am sending not only my son but also my

daughters to school. I have started to give the same opportunity to my children... I have decided to treat them equally.

FY: Do you like going to school? [I ask her four children who were sitting beside her.]

Children: Yes, yes! [a lot of giggling]

HD: Before, I had to force my son to go to school. He just wanted to play outside. At that time, I would spank him to go. But now, I don't have difficulty in sending him. When he is sullen, I convey my thoughts through examples and persuade him to go. But usually, he goes to school by himself. All my children are doing well in their education, you know!

FY: That's wonderful! How do you feel now?

HD: Now I am happy in my family life. My *aatmaa* [inner mind] is happy. My *aatmaa* is big... I can discuss many things with my husband and children in a respectful way. I can discuss with other people also. I am not a strong person, but I am not a weak person which I once was before.

FY: Was it difficult to make these changes?

HD: Oh yes. I went through many many difficulties. But now all these difficulties are gone in a shadow. Now I am happy. There is no darkness in my heart.

Harikala describes that the starting point of positive changes in her household was when changes in her *aatma* (self) had enabled her to bring back knowledge and skills acquired from training to her household. These outside learnings's she emphasizes was beneficial not only for

herself but also for her household members. Gradually, her household members started to change their understanding and behavior towards her. Her household members started to treat her with respect; now, her husband and mother-in-law cooperate with her, grants her a certain degree of freedom of action, and her children obey her instructions. She, on the other hand, can now teach her household members, give her opinions to persuade them in various situations, and treats her son and daughters equally by providing them the same education. As her new *aatma* (self) and her household members interact, a new household relationship is created, where she gains and is granted a more influential position enabling her to play a more effective role. This has made her feel happy and strong, making her *aatmaa* (inner mind) to further inflate.

To deepen the discussion with her, I asked Harikala providing leaves, flowers, and maize; whether she could map relationships of her household members in comparison between before and after her project participation. After my brief explanation of the procedure, she promptly made a diagram as figure 5 clarifying her perception. The two big vertical leaves represent Harikala's household; the right leaf before and the left leaf after her project participation. Each of the small leaves, petals, and maize placed on the two big leaves represent her household members. The tip of the big leaves indicate the pinnacle of the household hierarchy, thus the member placed at the top is the head of the household, and the other members are placed accordingly.

There are three distinct differences that can be discerned in Harikala's household in comparison between the two big leaves. The first difference is household membership. The yellow petal missing on the left leaf is because her father-in-law passed away briefly after her project participation.

The second difference is relationships among Harikala, her husband, and her

mother-in-law. On the right leaf, the three of them are positioned vertically, in hierarchal order of mother-in-law, her husband, and herself. On the left leaf however, the three of them are positioned somewhat horizontally, indicating the structural change in the household. When I asked if she thinks her relationship with them is completely equal, she explained that the disparity between the three of them has diminished, and since she practically has equal power, she is satisfied with that; “My mother-in-law is more passive and my husband shows much more understanding...both show respect [towards me]. Now when we make decisions in the house, all three of us discuss together and make decisions together. Therefore, [practically] we all three are equal. But on the leaf, out of respect, I have placed my mother-in-law at the top, my husband at second place, and myself just a little lower than my husband. I do not mind if I am lower than him.” Harikala implies that if she has practical equal power with her mother-in-law and husband, she does not have interest in resisting being in a deferential position, or in pursuing an entirely same position as her mother-in-law or her husband.

The third difference is relationships among her four children. Her son and her three daughters are placed in a vertical line on the right leaf; her son at the top and her three daughters in order of age follow with an interval. On the left leaf however, her four children are grouped horizontally, which means; “I am treating them equally [regardless of sex and age].” When I asked what she means by equality, she replied “There should be equal division for studying, working, and eating.”

These differences illustrate her perception on changes in household and gender relationships. Her perception is complex. Her definition of equality is ambiguous. Yet it is important to understand that her choices in taking practical power over a formal equal standing with

other household members, and sending both daughter and son to school and stating it as treating them equally, are consistent with many other LK low caste women after their project participation.

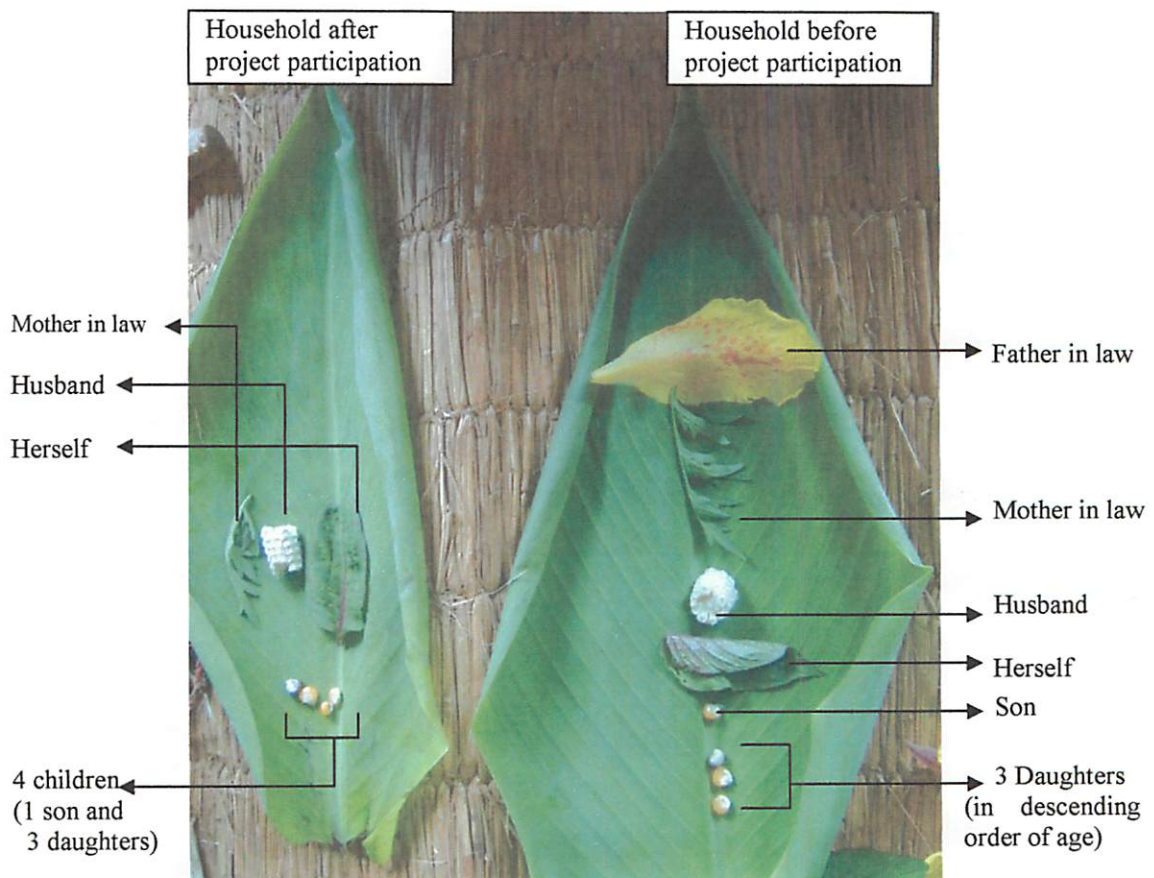


Figure 5 Changes in a low caste women's household before and after project participation

Ms. Goumati Sunar (43 years old, L village)

Ms. Goumati Sunar, an active leader of one of the L village women's group, elaborates on how her changes have influenced her household members: her husband (age 50) who is a migrant worker in Terai only coming back at seasonal intervals, her three sons (age 21, 19 and 12), and her two daughters (age 18 and 9).

FY: How do you manage both housework and project work?

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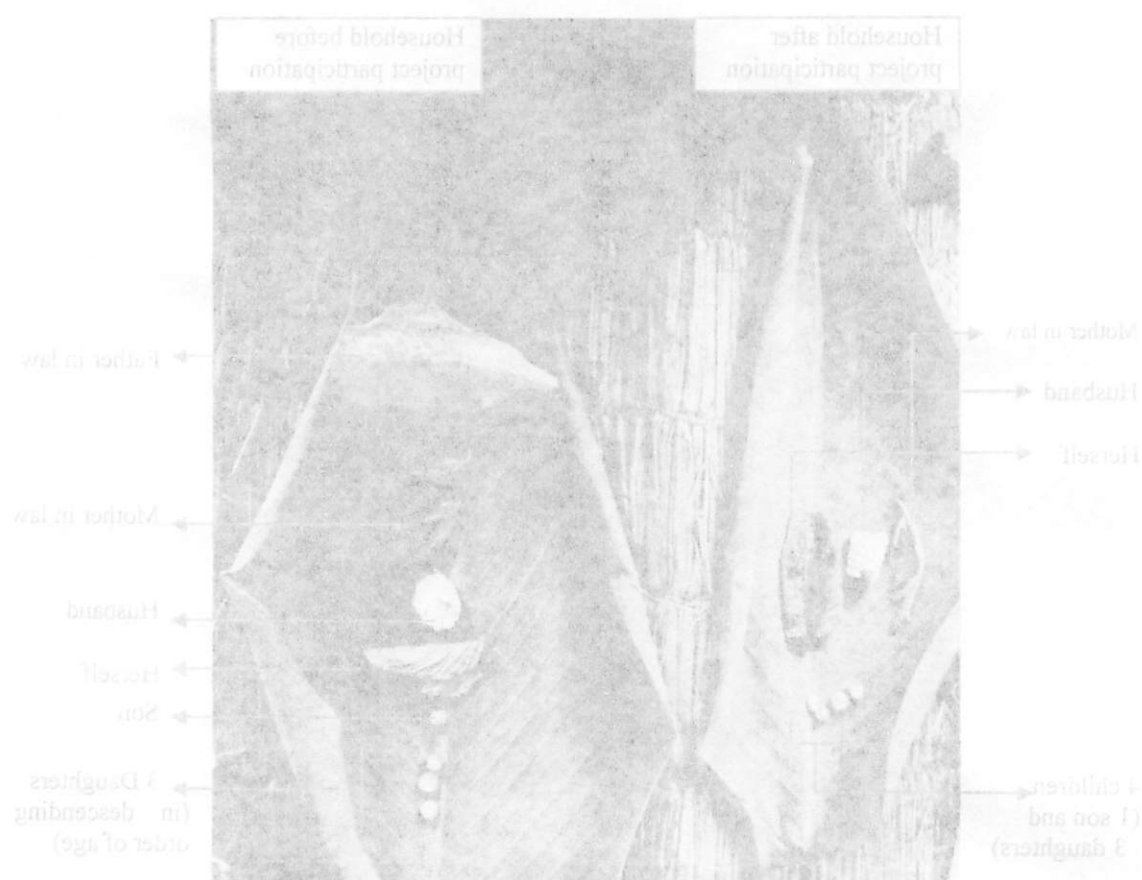


Figure 2: Changes in a low caste women's household before and after project participation

Ms. Gournati Sunar (43 years old, L village)

Ms. Gournati Sunar, an active leader of one of the L village women's group, elaborates on how her changes have influenced her household members: her husband (age 50) who is a migrant worker in Tern only coming back at seasonal intervals, her three sons (age 21, 19 and 12), and her two daughters (age 18 and 9).

FY: How do you manage both housework and project work?

GS: When I need to attend many meetings, I make [working] plans and organize when to do what [so that the housework and project work is accomplished]. I decide when to work in the field, when to attend meetings, and so on. When I am very busy, I even get up around 3:00 or 4:00 o'clock in the mornings and finish my housework and then participate in the meetings.

FY: So making plans in housework is new to you?

GS: Yes. Before, I was just working and working day after day... I did not have any free time. Now I am working nicely inside my house. Now I know how to manage my time, make plans, and do according to plan. I can sit with my husband, sons and daughters in one place and discuss the plan... Before, my husband did not care about me. But now his attitude has changed. He often asks kindly, "How much money do you need now?" or "What are your problems?" "Do you have any difficulties?" I have changed, that is why my husband has also changed. My children also cooperate in housework. Now there is good behavior in the family. There is good relationship within the family.

FY: How do you feel?

GS: I am happy. I am in satisfaction... My *aatmaa* [inner mind] has become bigger. [pointing at her heart].

FY: In what situation does your *aatmaa* become bigger?

GS: When I feel better, at that time my *aatmaa* becomes bigger. If we can do something, it becomes bigger. Sometimes *aatmaa* becomes bigger, sometimes it becomes smaller. When I feel sad *aatmaa* becomes smaller, when I feel happy *aatmaa* becomes bigger.

When we get sadness, when we get happiness... it comes from *aatmaa*...

FY: In what kind of situation do you feel happy?

GY: If there is good behavior in family...there is good relationship within family, and with sons and daughters. If my sons and daughters are in satisfaction, in that way my *aatmaa* becomes bigger. If everything becomes better and better in my family, [my] *aatmaa* becomes bigger. [pointing at her heart]

FY: So now, your *aatmaa* has become bigger.

GS: Yes. I have become strong and brave.... and my *aatma-bal* [inner power] has increased

FY: If your *aatmaa* becomes biggest, what will happen?

GS: Anything I can do. If strong and brave, anything can be done.

FY: Anything means?

GS: What I want to do [I can do]. If there is no *aatmaa*, there is no courage. I have to stay in the house. If my *aatmaa* is big, my heart is assured, anything can be done and anywhere I can go!

Goumati explains reciprocal recognition of her position of her new *aatma* (self) in the household as a household manager, by herself and her household members have enabled her to cope with both household and project work. She now organizes household work using her acquired planning skills rather than working passively. Household members discuss and cooperate with her plans, indicating their acknowledgement of her as someone who can do something more on her own initiative, someone who is accepted to do it, and someone who can ask for support to accomplish it.

Through interaction between her *aatma* (self) and her household members, she is reconfiguring her household role and household relationships, where she can act more on her own will than others will. In this situation, her *aatmaa* (inner mind) further inflates giving her satisfaction, her *aatma-bal* (inner power) increases, and her idea on her *aatma* (self) is further strengthened. She envisions to do something she could not have done before and go somewhere she could not have gone before.

To conclude this section on LK low caste women's changes in their household: empowerment at the household domain, I summarize the process and the consequences. LK low caste women who possess a new *aatma* (self) start to integrate their new learning's from development activities into their respective households. Gradually, their household members find these learning's benefit their household as a whole. Main aspects that were pointed out by household members include fresh vegetables cooked for meals, fruit and fodder trees planted around their gardens, cleanliness in their house, sanitary facilities such as household toilets and drinking water pipes nearby, loans from the micro-credit scheme, children going to school, and their women lively. Household members perceive low caste women who have brought back these changes to be different beings than before and acknowledge low caste women to take more initiative in what they do. This is reinforced by the prestige associated with development in LK; as a household member, a low caste woman who participates in development brings prestige to the household.

This interaction between a low caste woman and her other household members leads to repositioning a low caste woman's new *aatma* (self) in the household where she goes through a realistic change from someone who works silently inside the household to someone who participates actively both inside and outside the household. In this transition, *aatma-bal* (inner power) is

generated enabling her to take further initiatives in redefining who she is, what she wants to do, what she wants other household members to do, widening her possibilities of action and reflecting her various goals. As her position in the household becomes more influential, more responsible, the gap between her *aatma* (self) and other household members diminishes, creating a new relationship of cooperation and equality within the household members.

The consequences of LK low caste women's empowerment process at the household domain identified by themselves were, respect and cooperation from their household members: in-laws, husbands, and children; better relationship among household members with less quarrelling; participation in family meetings and family decisions; a managing role in household work including allocation of household work to other members; a certain degree of freedom of time and action; a more equal status with their husbands and in-laws; ability to make contributions to the household such as cooking nutritious meals from their kitchen gardens, taking loans from the micro-credit scheme, teaching other household members what they have learned from training and meetings; and ability to initiate action to influence household members.

These results that have brought changes in low caste women's roles and relationships with their household members potentially contain forces that can radically change low caste women's status and the power structure of their respective households. However, I want to point out that low caste women do not have this intention. I did not come across any low caste women who desired an exact equal status with their husbands, in-laws, or anybody else in their household. When asked why, many mentioned that it is sufficient now that they are accepted practically as equal beings in the household, and as they can participate in household activities with a more equal stance, they do not need a formal or an exact equal status. Rather they emphasized their interest in enhancing their

capacity by gaining more knowledge and skill to improve themselves and their livelihood, which will bring direct benefit to their respective households. This indicates that low caste women do not wish to push their new *aatma* (self) so far as violating household interests or household relationships by neglecting their in-laws, husbands, and children, nor do they wish to overthrow the household hierarchy itself. The importance of family makes the goals of these women different than those of many Western feminists, who often stress self-actualization and autonomy as appropriate goals (MacLeod 1992). I believe that this recognition by household members have enabled them to accept and accelerate low caste women's empowerment in the household domain.

5.2.4. Changes in Village

As an example of how LK low caste women described changes in their villages: empowerment at the village domain, I introduce excerpts of two interviews and a focus group discussion with them. These narratives based on low caste women's interpersonal experiences with other villagers show the social image of low caste women have transformed from 'women can not do anything' to 'women can do something'. This has led to low caste women's alternative views, constructed within and against their society, on their social roles, and social relationships related to gender and caste, which they emphasize they could realize and prove in their actions they themselves have willingly chosen. These narratives indicate that changes in their individual domain have not only influenced their household domain, but also their villager domain and beyond.

Ms. Pabitra B.K. (53 years old, L village)

One sunny morning, when Pabitra and I were sitting in front of her kitchen garden

admiring her well grown vegetables, she chuckled softly and began to tell me an incident on how the VDC chairman (high caste man) of L village changed his thoughts and attitudes by seeing her vegetables.

PBK: On the day you gave us [vegetable seeds], I happened to meet the VDC chairman on my way home. When he saw me he said “Those [vegetable seeds] are not just to keep in your porta [part of sari]⁶ and keep inside the house to decay, but ought to be grown; which you can not do.” [in a haughty voice]

FY: Why did he say something like that? [disapprovingly]

PBK: He thought we [low caste] could not do [grow vegetables]. Now we have come to know this [how to grow vegetables]. But before our forefathers used to ask [for vegetables] to high caste people and bring [from their house]. That is the reason he told in that way. But actually, we are harvesting good vegetables from our kitchen garden, and in that way we are saving money.

FY: What did you reply to the VDC chairman?

PBK: I had no answer... Besides, there is no need to reply. But after several months, I brought some beautiful tomatoes and eggplants I had grown [in my kitchen garden] to the VDC chairman’s house.

FY: What did the VDC chairman say?

PBK: At that time, the VDC chairman was not there, so I just left my vegetables [at his house] and left. But I noticed he was also growing vegetables in his kitchen garden! And when on another occasion I met him on the way, he said “you have proved!”

FY: [We both laugh heartily.] Could you do something like this before?

PBK: Oh no, no! Ah ha ha... My *aatma-bal* [inner power] had increased. In the beginning, the high caste people got angry with all these training [for low caste women]. They used to say “Now you have got much training. You will become rich and rise in a higher position.” Now they are surprised [of what they see].

FY: Has the relationship between low caste people and high caste people changed then?

PBK: Yes, it has improved. We [low caste people] were not counted as human beings before. But these days, the high caste people ask us [low caste people] to attend [village] meetings. Now, I have developed my *aatma-bisvasa* [self-confidence]. I always dislike people who are proud. I want to change them by mouth, not by stick!

Pabitra, based on her experience of interaction between high caste people, describes the significant changes on how low caste people are perceived in L village. First, she points out changes in her own perception of low caste people’s capacity and action. She a low caste women, who possesses a new *aatma* (self), utilizes her *aatma-bal* (inner power) in order to go to the house of the VDC chairman, a high caste man with considerable political power, to show that she possesses the knowledge, skill, and resources to grow vegetables. These acts that she could not have chosen to take before, directly oppose his and her image of a low caste: a person who is obliged to work for a high caste in order to receive vegetables. She even states with confidence that low caste people’s vegetables are of good quality, hinting that their vegetables are actually better than high caste people’s. This indicates her perception on low caste people as people who are able to do things and skillfully at that, although they were previously perceived as beings unable to do so.

Second, she points out changes in high caste people's perception towards low caste people's capacity and action. The VDC chairman exclaims "You have proved!" showing his renewed understanding towards her. High caste people who were once angry because they thought low caste people would outdo them are surprised to see how low caste people are changing and ask them to participate in village meetings, a setting where participation of low caste people were not an option. This indicates that low caste people are changing in a different way as high caste people initially thought; enabling high caste people to reconsider who low caste people are and what they can do.

As a result of significant changes in both low caste and high caste people's perception toward low caste people, Pabitra recreates her social role and her social position in the village hierarchy. This is conspicuous in her new actions in attending regular village meetings together with other low caste women, and speaking her opinions in front of high caste people, with a vision to further change inter-caste relationships on more equal terms. Through these proactive collective actions expanding low caste women's collective influence that affects a village level change, Pabitra develops her *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence).

Ms. Kesha Kumari Darjee (39 years old, K village)

I turn now to the narrative of Ms. Kesha Kumari Darjee, the low caste woman leader of K village, who explained in her previous narrative, how she has strived to show her *aatma-bal* (inner power) in order to prove herself to herself and to others. She now narrates on how she has expanded her sphere of influence in K village that has eventually led her to become a women's leader in a micro-credit national network in 2005.

FY: Are there any changes in the community?

KKD: There are so many changes before and now. Before, the men were always drunk and dominating us [low caste women]. But now, no. Now [high caste and low caste] men are coming to women asking “How can we work together?” Before, they were not asking such kind of things. They were thinking women can not do anything.

FY: Why do they come? I mean, it’s an astounding change isn’t it?

KKD: Now they [men] have realized that these women understand everything by taking training. They are getting some things from outside that are not from the village. [They think that] We know more than them.

FY: So do you teach them?

KKD: Yes. I always share about the [contents of] training with men and women. [In addition] For men, [I tell them] you have to change and give advice to us [low caste women]. I always give advice to other people and also take their advice as well. I never discriminate poor people. That’s why all people like me. When some people see dirty and poor people, they dominate [them]. But I never do such kind of things and I am always against of this [domination].

FY: In what situation do men come to ask for advice?

KKD: At any time. When there is any work, they come to us [low caste women] for advice.

FY: Can you give me an example?

KKD: When there are monthly [village] meetings. Forest Consumer Committee invites

me for meetings. Drinking Water Committee also, they have invited me for a meeting and the School Management Committee also. I am also the educative member of that committee. At these times, men come to me and ask for advice.

FY: So now you are participating in many village activities?

KKD: Yes, compared to before, I have changed a lot from my side as well as the community. I have learned to maintain my identity. I could prove that if we [women] do something men can not dominate us. We can do something and we can stand on our own feet. So I went to the Village Development Committee and the Central District Office and gave my views to the people of these [government] offices... Before, I couldn't even speak my name in front of them.

FY: How did they react?

KKD: They listened to me and recommended my name to become a member of the Village Micro-Entrepreneur Organization. This is a district level organization which has just been registered by Dalits and women. They appointed me to become a chairperson of Parbat District. After that I became a representative of 20 districts. Then they selected me as a chairperson at the national level. In this way I became a national leader.

FY: How do you feel now?

KKD: I have *aatma-bal* [inner power]. I have *aatma-bisvasa* [self-confidence]. Now I can take leadership in the community. We [men and women] have equal power. I want to make other women aware and make this village a model village. I do not [act out of] love for myself, but I always [act out of] love for my village sisters.

When asked about changes in the village, Kesha stresses that changes in her new *aatma* (self) and other low caste women's *aatma* (self) have created changes in K village. First, she points out a new phenomenon: high and low caste men coming to low caste women to seek advice. This she describes is because men regard outside knowledge and skill related to development more efficient than those in the village. So salient is villager's conviction that development will improve their lives, it reverses people's attitude to a far extent: high and low caste men coming to a low caste's house to receive advice from a low caste woman.

Kesha realizes this intense grip of development over villagers and perceives this as a potential to change inter-personal relationships in the village hierarchy. Hence, she further internalizes the outside knowledge and skill in order to control it by her own initiative. When men come to her, she strategically uses it to influence them, but simultaneously, asks them for advice showing deference to them. Consequently, she is accepted by men as a different woman than before, a woman who is developed, but also as a woman who does not threaten their status. This recognition eases the ongoing struggle between women and men, low caste and high caste, and creates a platform to develop a new relationship of cooperation. Frequent invitations from men for her to participate in various village meetings are just one example. By establishing a different and yet as much as an important standpoint for women, and that a low caste, she proves her conviction: "we can do something and we can stand on our own feet",

Second, she points out her own initiatives to open up a new realm for women outside the village boundaries: the Central District Office and the Micro-Entrepreneur Organization. These actions are a realization of her vision to make other women aware that they can do something, and to

transform her village into a model village. Furthermore, she pushes her way to a leader in a micro-credit national network, demonstrating to the society of what she a low caste woman can be. However, she emphasizes she is taking leadership out of her love to other village women, implying that she is acting not just for her self-interest but for other women as well. This in turn creates solidarity among women to support her to take leadership in the village and beyond.

As a result of these changes in her social role and social relationships in the society where she can take leadership in important organizational tasks, give voice as a representative of other low caste and high caste women, and act as a leading figure to create social change, she states she now has *aatma-bal* (inner power), and *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence).

Focus Group Discussion on *Aatma-bal* & *Aatma-bisvasa*

Aatma-bal (inner power) and *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence): these two *aatma*-compound concepts were often quoted together by low caste women when they describe their changes, especially in the village domain, before and after their participation in development. In a focus group discussion with eight LK low caste women that followed Kesha's interview, I asked them the difference between *aatma-bal* (inner power) and *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence). All agreed that *aatma-bal* (inner power) and *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence) are different in meaning, and that their recognition of *aatma-bal* (inner power) came prior to their *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence). Many linked *aatma-bal* (inner power) with positive thoughts and capacity, whereas *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence) with self-reliance, autonomy, and belief in their inner power. For example, Kesha said, "What we think positive, that is *aatma-bal* (inner power). There should be capacity inside us. If we don't have capacity... that's why all people are dominating us." Mira B.K. said,

“*Aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence) means we can do by ourself, no need to rely on anybody.” As more discussion followed back and forth, Rupa B.K. explicitly defined, “*Aatma-bal* (inner power) is determination and promise to ourself to do something, and *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence) is belief in ourself. After determination and promise to do something, we actually do it. When it is achieved, then we realize we can believe in ourself.” With this, all looked satisfied with the outcome of the discussion, and started to clap their hands.

If we return to Kesha’s narrative with this comprehension, we understand that she first promises herself that she can do something with her *aatma-bal* (inner power), and when she takes action and actually achieves it, she deepens her belief in herself (*aatma-bisvasa*). *Aatma-bal* (inner power) intrinsically motivates one to take autonomous actions, and when one’s autonomous actions are successful, one feels *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence).

To conclude this section on LK low caste women’s changes in their village: empowerment at the village domain, I summarize the process and the consequences. LK low caste women’s struggle to situate their new *aatma* (self), through interpersonal actions with village members, leads to recreating their roles and relationships in the society. LK low caste women, by utilizing their *aatma-bal* (inner power), show and prove other villagers they have the will and capacity that they can make positive changes in their society. As villagers perceive low caste women as ‘developed’: transforming their social image of low caste women from ‘women can not do anything’ to ‘women can do something’, and as they see they can also take advantage of development that is associated with and initiated by low caste women, villagers attitudes and behaviors change towards them. Here, low caste women gain and is granted to share a leadership role with other villagers in village

development activities.

The consequences of LK low caste women's empowerment process at the village domain identified by themselves were, respect from other villagers; new relationship of cooperation transcending caste and gender; their voice being heard; active participation and contribution to the society, such as undertaking important organizational roles, practicing their organizational and leadership skills in village meetings and activities, ability to take loans from the micro-credit scheme and to develop their acquired or improved skills into a small-scale business in the villages, such as tailoring, vegetable farming, and goat raising etc. Especially, LK low caste women stressed their satisfaction on the aspect that they themselves, who were once devalued, can now by their own will, individually and collectively provide something valuable from their side in order to make positive changes in their society.

As low caste women's new *aatma* (self) take root, and as their roles and relationships in the society change, the structural relationship in the village hierarchy transforms to some extent. The gap between caste and gender relationships decreases. However, the relationships between low caste women and other villagers in almost all cases are still hierarchical. For instance, one low caste woman's voice is not enough to controvert a decision made by high caste men in village meetings. Inter-caste behavior in spheres that are directly related to water and lineage, such as commensality and marriage, continue to be influenced, although in a lesser degree, by the purity-impurity codes of conduct, branding low caste women's impurity.

Moreover, LK low caste women themselves do not wish to eliminate this hierarchical relationship or the purity-impurity codes of conduct by threatening the position of high caste men or low caste men, nor of high caste women. Rather than choosing to overthrow this hierarchy and

confronting the very basis of the system that will lead to severe conflict with other villagers, LK low caste women choose to take power, a “power less in terms of domination over others (with its implicit assumption that a gain for women implies a loss for men), and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength” (Moser 1993: 74), that will in turn create a mutual relationship based on respect and cooperation with other villagers. LK low caste women choose to live with the hierarchy, and position themselves where they are accepted by other villagers, though their struggle to reposition themselves will continue for future positive changes. As a result of these interactions that both embrace acceptance and resistance between low caste women and low caste men, high caste men, high caste women, we see things occurring that have not occurred before in many areas of village life in LK.

5.3. What Empowerment Means to LK Low Caste Women

In order to comprehend what empowerment means to LK low caste women, I now turn from summarizing the changes in the three interrelated domains: their self, their household, and their village, to intertwining the changes into an overall picture. Focusing on *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self), the two analytical concepts that revealed notions of empowerment of LK low caste women, I first derive an empowerment model, and then proceed to its significance.

5.3.1. Empowerment Model

I argue that the interactions between LK low caste women’s *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) brings out the internalization process of their empowerment. This *aatmaa*-*aatma* interaction is presented in Fig.6, which can be discerned into five circulative stages: 1) small *aatmaa*

to a big *aatmaa*: inducing positive feelings, 2) old *aatma* to a new *aatma*: visioning alternative selves, 3) developing *aatma-bal*, 4) autonomous actions, and 5) positive feelings and/or thoughts as a result of autonomous actions. However, these stages do not appear in a linear trait; rather, they swing back and forth and flow into a spiral reflecting LK low caste women's struggles and continuation of their internalization process. I now turn to describe each stage in detail.

STAGE 1: Small *Aatmaa* to a Big *Aatmaa*: Inducing Positive Feelings

This stage is the starting point of the internalization process of empowerment, where LK low caste women's *aatmaa* (inner mind) inflates from a small *aatmaa* to a big *aatmaa*. As discussed, when LK low caste women's *aatmaa* (inner mind) is small, they are subject to fear, sorrow, and inferiority. These feelings influence them to view themselves trivial and repress themselves to act according to their capacity. As their *aatmaa* (inner mind) inflates, they feel happiness and courage, freeing themselves from their fear, sorrow and inferiority, and preparing them to prove their capacity. Thus, inflation of LK low caste women's *aatmaa* (inner mind) implies changes in their feelings from negative to positive; this is the premise to bring out their own capacity.

This inflation of LK low caste women's *aatmaa* (inner mind) overlaps with the initial phase of the LLIP, where LK low caste women for their first time start to participate in a new social space: development activities such as group meetings and training. Here, "for a time they come to "disinhabit" the boundaries of everyday life" and inhabit there to co-develop change" (Skinner, Holland, and Pach III 1998:8). Indeed, in the narratives in precedent sections, LK low caste women express that participation in group meetings and training had enabled them to create

attachment and knowledge with each other, and induce positive feelings such as happiness and courage within and among each other. As a result, their *aatmaa* (inner mind) had become bigger.

However, I want to point out that the initial creation of this new social space is rather initiated by development workers rather than LK low caste women. This is because when LK low caste women participate in development activities as their first experience, it is the development workers who take more initiative, whereas LK low caste women are more an invitee. Nevertheless, although in the beginning, this new social space is rather given to LK low caste women, and their act of participation is rather heteronomous than autonomous, their feelings of happiness and courage as a result of their new actions inflates their *aatmaa* (inner mind) and induces positive feelings within and among their selves. This is the basis of their empowerment.

STAGE 2: Old *Aatma* to a New *Aatma*: Visioning Alternative Selves

As LK low caste women's *aatmaa* (inner mind) transforms from a small *aatmaa* to a big *aatmaa*, their sense of *aatma* (self) also transforms from an old *aatma* to a new *aatma*. As discussed, their old *aatma* (self) is in accordance with 'women can not do anything' image, whereas their new *aatma* (self) is in accordance with 'women can do something' image. When LK low caste women perceive themselves as "women can not do anything", they are compelled to follow the rules of conduct of what low caste women should be. When they perceive themselves as "women can do something", they start to vision a new *aatma* (self) of who they are and what they can do. Thus, transformation of LK low caste women's *aatma* (self) implies they are going through a consciousness level change in their own self-perception.

LK low caste women's alternative views on their own *aatma* (self) are brought out by

continuous participation in the collective new social space: series of development activities such as group meetings and training that “disinhabit” the boundaries of everyday life. In other words, LK low caste women’s series of “inhabitation” in their new social space enables them to transform their sense of *aatma* (self) and transcend their self-image. Although this stage is still strongly influenced by development workers, who are initial catalysts of these changes, envisioning a new *aatma* (self) open doors to transform themselves by their own initiative. As Foucault puts it, techniques of the self involve a degree of freedom from or within society, for they “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, and conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves” (Foucault 1988:18).

STAGE 3: Developing *Aatma-bal*

As LK low caste women’s sense of *aatma* (self) transforms from an old *aatma* to a new *aatma*, *aatma-bal* (inner power) is generated inside them. As discussed, *aatma-bal* (inner power) enables LK low caste women to think and act according to their new *aatma* (self), a self that believe they have the capacity to do something by their own initiative. Thus, their new-born *aatma-bal* (inner power) brings out their initiative to transform themselves by their own means. This stage becomes the turning point from LK low caste women’s heteronomy towards autonomy over their thoughts and actions.

Aatma-bal (inner power), indicated in LK low caste women’s narratives, develops both in and out of LK low caste women’s new social space: development activities such as group meetings and training. When they “inhabit” in their new social space, their *aatma-bal* (inner power) is stimulated with the support of group members and development workers. When they “disinhabit”

their new social space, their *aatma-bal* (inner power) is stimulated by their own individual struggles. When LK low caste women return to their everyday life, they return with a new *aatma* (self). LK low caste women struggle to reposition this new *aatma* (self) in their self, their household, and their village. In this very struggle, *aatma-bal* (inner power) develops and intrinsically motivates LK low caste women to think and act according to their altered-selves.

As *aatma-bal* (inner power) develops inside LK low caste women, their understanding of their new *aatma* (self) and their will to embody their new *aatma* (self) is strengthened and combined. They are no longer subject to their negative feelings and/or thoughts associated with their old *aatma* (self) but they start to depend on their new *aatma* (self) with positive feelings and/or thoughts. Thus, development of *aatma-bal* (inner power) enables LK low caste women to be the author of their own thoughts and actions that represent aspects of their new *aatma* (self). For this reason, this stage is pivotal for the internalization process of empowerment.

STAGE 4: Autonomous Actions

As LK low caste women's *aatma-bal* (inner power) develops, they start to embody their thoughts into self-determined actions according to their new *aatma* (self). This stage can be seen where LK low caste women transform their new perceptions into autonomous actions. I call these actions autonomous because "the locus of initiation of their behavior is within themselves rather than in some external control" (Deci 1995: 31). This enforces their feelings of autonomy, giving them the feelings that their actions are truly chosen by themselves rather than being imposed or regulated by an outside force.

These autonomous actions can be analyzed into four different types. The first type of

action is information gathering. LK low caste women started to gather information by themselves in order to meet their various needs and strategies. For example, they started to initiate group meetings and training, to gain information that will improve their livelihood. The second type of action is problem solving. LK low caste women started to solve problems without relying on others. Only when they could not solve the problem by themselves, did they come to ask for outside support. For example, when a group member was beaten by her husband, other group members together began to negotiate with the abusive husband to stop domestic violence; which usually worked. Only when the negotiation failed, did they bring this agenda to development workers or other sources. The third type of action is challenge. LK low caste women started to tackle more difficult problems than they had faced before. For example, Kesha started to go to the Village Development Committee and the Central District Office to give her views on gender and caste equity to government officials. Low caste women, as a group, began to seek support from other development agencies and network with other women's groups, expanding their social mobility. The fourth type of action is contribution to the society. LK low caste women started to contribute their resources toward others as well. For example, low caste women of K village donated some part of their money from their micro-credit scheme in order to build a water well in a nearby hamlet where residents are relatively poor. When asked why they had done such an act they answered, "They are more in need than us."

All these four types of autonomous actions are usually seen intermingled. The common aspect is that these actions are a result of individual or collective LK low caste women's *aatma-bal* (inner power) enhancing their capacity, "leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action" (Karl: 1995) in their self, households, villages and

beyond.

STAGE 5: Positive Feelings and/or Thoughts as a Result of Autonomous Actions

As a result of autonomous actions that is an outcome of their *aatma-bal*, LK low caste women increases their happiness and satisfaction, and start to realize their competence, which further inflates their *aatmaa* (inner mind). Especially, when their autonomous actions achieve their needs, positive feelings are strongly felt. However, even when their autonomous actions do not achieve their initial intentions, positive feelings occur to some extent. This is because their *aatma-bal* (inner power) encourages them to challenge again. Furthermore, as LK low caste women's autonomous actions result in active participation in their household and their village, they starts to gain *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence) and *aatma-nibharra* (self-dependence).

These feelings of happiness, satisfaction, competence, self-confidence, and self-dependence, that further inflates their *aatmaa* (inner mind) are fed-back to their *aatma-bal* (inner power), that further stimulates them to further autonomous actions. Consequently, this circulation continues, facilitating LK low caste women's internalization process of empowerment.

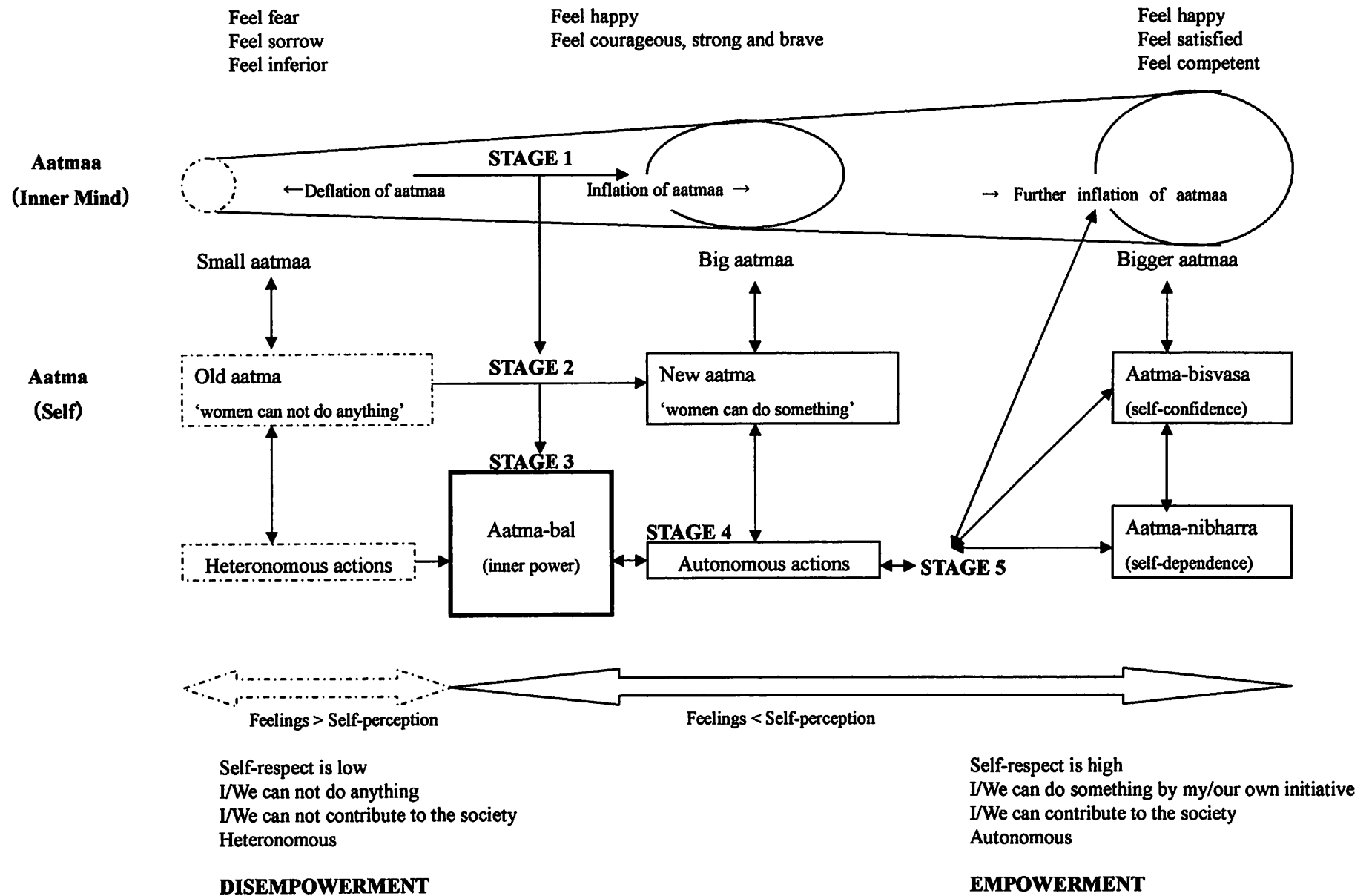


Fig.6. Empowerment Model of LK low caste women

5.3.2. Significance of Empowerment

What empowerment means to LK low caste women in the first place is a process of inner transformations. This process both individual and collective, “cannot be done to or for women, but has to emerge from them” (Afshar 1998:3). Ultimately, empowerment, in LK low caste women’s own perspectives mean to generate and develop their *aatma-bal* (inner power) through their *aatmaa* (inner mind)-*aatma* (self) interactions enabling them to take autonomous actions.

I want to emphasize three points. First, LK low caste women’s empowerment do not limit changes to themselves. Their inner transformations transcend the individual domain and start to influence and become influenced by collective domains: their households and their society. Empowerment is reciprocal.

Second, LK low caste women’s empowerment can not be interpreted as strengthening individualism, where they plunge their new *aatma* (self) into their households and their society, in order to pursue their personal needs over others. LK low caste women’s *aatma* (self) is not conceptualized as an “impermeable wall” (Lutz 1998:88). Rather their *aatma* (self) influences and is influenced by their household members’ *aatma* (self) and village members’ *aatma* (self) in their everyday life as numerous interactions occur. In these circumstances, LK low caste women’s personal needs are often intertwined with household members’ and village members’ personal needs. LK low caste women often give precedent to pursue these common needs. Their idea behind this choice has multi-level meanings. However, my instinct is that this idea of empowerment has been uniquely derived largely because they are delegated to the most marginalized position in the society where they have less rivalry with others and possess powers of magnanimity for survival. They do not want more and more, nor do they want everything, otherwise they will want all power, which

will be a menace to others.

Third, LK low caste women's empowerment does not threaten the existing power relationships in the household and in the society, though changes in power relations do occur. LK low caste women's emphasis is not to play a dominant role in their society, undermining the relative power of low caste men, high caste men and women. Rather, they place emphasis to create new roles and new relationships in their households and in their society, where they can actively participate and make recognized and valuable contributions to these domains to co-develop positive changes together. That is, LK low caste women wish to build relationships built on mutual respect, cooperation, and equality, and become co-actors incorporating their capacity together with other actors to realize inner transformations of their households and their society. In other words, they envision building together, households with *aatma-bal*, societies with *aatma-bal*, enhancing household empowerment and society empowerment from within.

To put it the other way round, LK low caste women's empowerment can be seen as a process of gaining recognition by household members and villagers that LK low caste women's new role and new relationships will not disempower them. Household members and villagers, who have feared that they will be confronted and deprived of their power, have realized it was imaginary. Furthermore, they realize transgression of codes of conduct of caste and gender, is not a sin and dangerous that leads to disorder. As they see with their very eyes that LK low caste women's empowerment not only brings positive changes in women themselves but also to their households, and to some extent to the society itself, they start to accept the changing roles of LK low caste women and to create from their side a new relationship with them as well. This is the very reason why LK low caste women could actualize their empowerment when it was once against the social

norms and practices.

Thus, empowerment, for LK low caste women, is clearly not just changes in their feelings, self-perceptions, inner power, and capacity, nor is it a zero-sum game in which only they gain and others lose. Empowerment is perceived to be a positive sum, a continual process of inner transformations that develop inner power and derive autonomous actions in their self, that 'critically and creatively reshape their worlds' (Wieringa 1994:834), opening up their new roles and new relationships based on respect, cooperation and equality with other members of their households and their societies, that in turn leads to a more just and egalitarian order.

CHAPTER 6 Conclusion

This study is based on a conviction that notions of empowerment are specific to particular groups of women in particular times and places. As the voices of this ethnography show, LK low caste women possessed their own notions of empowerment. Their notions were shaped in two terms: *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self), two cultural concepts that derive from the Hindu fundamental principle *aatman* (soul). These were their language of empowerment.

A close examination of LK low caste women's narratives surrounding *aatmaa* (inner mind) and *aatma* (self) revealed that their empowerment had brought significant changes in their self, household, and village, creating their new roles and new relationships with household members and village members. Although the degree of changes differed among women, some becoming prominent leaders and taking active leadership in their households and in their communities, whereas some reported indeterminate changes; it was still possible to consider the elements that enhanced their changes in these three domains.

These elements in relevance to Rowlands' study (1995, 1997, 1998) of perceiving empowerment as achieving 1) power over, 2) power to, 3) power with, and 4) power within, can be useful to seek implications for development practitioners working with marginalized women. LK low caste women's empowerment can be identified to be an achievement less in terms of power over, which is a power that will bring out radical changes and direct confrontations between high caste men and women, and low caste men by pursuing precedence over them; but more in terms of power to, power with, and power within.

Power to, according to Rowlands is the kind of leadership that comes from the wish to see

a group achieve what it is capable of; for LK low caste women this power can be seen as developing their *aatma-bal* (inner power), a power to do something, bringing out their own capacities and actually practicing these capacities according to their new *aatma* (self), both individually and collectively. Power with, according to Rowlands is a collective power; for LK low caste women this power can be seen as combining their *aatma-bal* (inner power) with each other as a group utilizing their problem-solving and organizing skills, in order to implement activities that are in their group interest. Furthermore, LK low caste women combined their *aatma-bal* (inner power) with their household members' *aatma-bal* (inner power) and village members' *aatma-bal* (inner power) building coalitions to achieve common needs. Power within, according to Rowlands is a spiritual strength; for LK low caste women this power is inflating their *aatmaa* (inner mind) and forming a new *aatma* (self), verifying and realizing their authentic self. This power has led to development of their *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence) and *aatma-nibharra* (self-dependence), in turn encouraging others to have and to accept *aatma-bisvasa* (self-confidence) and *aatma-nibharra* (self-dependence) in themselves and in others.

Thus, LK low caste women have actualized their empowerment by diverting to pursue the power over and by combining the power to, power with, and the power within, that has been derived from their *aatmaa* (inner mind)-*aatma* (self) interactions. As the pivot of this interaction is inherent in themselves, and their goal is not to overthrow caste and gender hierarchies, but to create their new roles and new relationships with others based on mutual respect, cooperation and equality, and to contribute to positive changes of the society as a whole, household members and villagers have gradually accepted them as partners. As Diane Margolis points out, "the majority of women do not wish to become men, nor even to rid the world of men. Ideologies of opposition and

inversion are less attractive when the end goal centers on creating a new relationship of cooperation or equality rather than eliminating the other” (Margolis 1989:387-416). In this context, LK low caste women’s empowerment has been enhanced, enabling them to make significant changes that they themselves define important in many areas of their social, economic, and political life.

Although making predictions is difficult, I argue that LK low caste women’s ongoing empowerment process will continue to influence and be influenced by the rapid social change in their society, shaping possibilities of further qualitative changes. Listening to their voices will lead to discover ways to further promote women’s empowerment in their complex, diverse, and dynamic realities of their lives.

In conclusion, the ethnographic data presented here can be used to suggest that women’s empowerment will not be achieved unless the language of empowerment is created by the particular group of women themselves in their own local context and is continuously shared among themselves and others who are important to them.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

¹ A pseudonym for two neighboring villages located in Parbat District of Nepal. When I refer to the two villages I describe them as LK. When I refer to only 1 village, I describe it as L village of K village. I choose to use pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality.

² This project was initiated by two NGO's: a Japanese NGO, with which I had worked as a project coordinator throughout the project phase, and a local Nepalese NGO. This project was implemented in five neighboring villages of Parbat District including LK from September 1999 to August 2004, with the major goal to empower low caste women through improving their social and economic status and in turn enabling them to become agents of change in developing their self, their households, and their own communities. As the project took root in the villages, villagers, especially women from the higher caste, also began to participate in the project activities. The overview of the project will be taken up in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

¹ A phenomenon where there is a disproportionate number of women who are poor, compared to men, especially in developing countries, bearing an unequal share of the burden of poverty. An oft-repeated statement in this respect is that 70 percent out of 1.5 billion people living on 1 dollar a day or less are women (UNDP 1995). In addition, the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in the past decade.

² Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, opened for signature Mar. 1, 1980, 1249 U.N.T.S. 14. Ratified by Nepal May 22, 1991.

³ Nepal ranks 116th out of 144 countries in the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) in 2004. (UNDP 2004).

⁴ While the overall GDI score is 0.452, the rural areas is 0.430 whereas the urban areas is 0.562 (UNDP 2004). The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) indicates likewise: the overall GEM score is 0.391, the rural areas is 0.365 whereas the urban areas is 0.425 (UNDP 2004).

⁵ I leave the study of particular development programs, policies, and practices to other scholars; instead, I focus in this work on notions of empowerment of one particular group of women in one particular area of Nepal in one particular time period (cf. Ahearn 2001:8).

⁶ Public education became legal only in 1950s; in many parts of the country women still receive no education at all, and few women are educated even in the more progressive regions (Gilbert 1992:731)

⁷ UNDP points out this aspect in the *Nepal Human Development Report 2004*. The term "culture" is defined as the widely accepted sense of all the capabilities and habits acquired by human beings as members of societies (UNDP 2004: 31).

CHAPTER 3

¹ According to the 2001 government population census, out of the total population of 23.2 million people which comprises 102 caste /ethnic groups, 80.6% are Hindus, 10.7% Buddhists, 4.2% Muslims, 3.6% Kirat, 0.45% Christians, and 0.4% others. Countrywide statistics for Nepal should be taken with a grain of salt, however, as there are considerable logistical obstacles involved in conducting a national survey (Ahearn 2001:272).

² Although it is for this reason that the Hindu kings have been so revered down the ages by their subjects, the godliness of the now King Gyanendra has been degraded. Not only did he assume the throne after his widely respected brother King Birendra was killed in a tragic palace massacre, which derived gossips among many Nepalis of conspiracy, his handling of the three week pro-democracy protests of April 2005 was disastrous. One notable event was when the king instructed or allowed his security forces to cremate a lifeless body of a man who was shot dead by the police during the demonstrations, without consent or knowledge of his wife and family: a grossest insult to the Hindu faith one can imagine. This incident turned good natured pro-democracy demonstrations into fervent anti-monarchy riots. (BBC News, South Asia: Legacy of Insanity in Nepal, April 29, 2006, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4953816.stm)

³ Parbatiya are the original Nepali-speaking Hill Hindus of Nepal. As Bennett explains, they migrated to the Himalayas from northern India at different periods and eventually formed the bulk of the conquering army of Prithivi Narayan Shah, when he invaded the Kathmandu Valley in the eighteenth century (Bennett 1983:10). Since then the high caste Parbatiya have always been the leading actors of Nepal, not only numerically but also culturally, politically, and economically.

⁴ This hierarchy was promulgated by the Rana king Jung Bahadur Rana via the Mulki Ain of 1854, the first National Legal Code of Nepal. The rulers chose Hindu principles, particularly the moral order of castes based upon the 'specific "amount" of purity' possessed by a person or group" (Hofer 1979). Under this Hindu dichotomy of purity/impurity, the diverse ethnic groups of Nepal with varied languages, customary laws and religions, social and cultural traditions were systematically classified into castes and were unified into an overarching hierarchal framework. Different privileges and obligations including land tenure, inheritance, education, punishment, inter-caste and intra-caste relationships including commensality and marriage were awarded according to ones caste. See Hofer (1979) for a comprehensive analysis of the caste hierarchy of Nepal.

⁵ See Burghart (1984) for an analysis of how the alien concept, the idea of the nation-state took root in the governmental discourse of Nepal.

⁶ See Cameron (1998) for low caste women's seclusion during her menstruation. Cameron in her study of low caste women in western Nepal explains that "the rules governing a woman's behavior during menstruation are straightforward: she is isolated from the family, does not touch or serve anyone except young nursing infants, and must not allow anything she touches to be touched by others" (Cameron 1998:248). Also see Bennett (1983) for high caste women's seclusion during her menstruation. Bennett in her study of high caste women in a Hindu community explains that "During the first three days of every menses, women become polluted and untouchables. For these three days a woman must not enter the kitchen, touch food or water that others will eat or drink, or even worship the gods or the ancestor spirits. She may not comb her hair or oil it, and she sleeps separately in a downstairs room" (Bennett 1983:215).

⁷ As noted in Chapter 1, Dalit women and men are under represented in ethnographic data and scientific records of Nepal, thus they are a little understood group. Moreover, the list of Dalit groups is still provisional as there remains some controversy over whether to include some groups into the Dalit category. Dalit NGOs have claimed that the Dalits comprise between 20 and 25 percent of the population. The government population census of 2001, in contrast, has estimated the Dalit population at 12.9 percent.

CHAPTER 4

¹ The director of the Nepalese local NGO. Durga's contribution towards the project cannot be overemphasized. He was one of the first high caste men in the village to go to low caste people's houses, sit together, eat together and discuss together with both women and men, transgressing the codes of conducts of caste and gender. His attitude brought out a controversy in the villages, yet, respect towards him did not degrade, due to his positive attitude of discussing with any question arisen, and his firm human relations with villagers that had been nurtured from his childhood. He was a catalyst of change for both low caste and high caste people. This reminds us that when working in villages, in order to empower the disadvantaged groups, it is crucial to work together with people of the advantaged group as well, since it is they who can swim through the complex web of relationships in the communities and are able to make negotiations with community members whenever necessary.

² A VDC chairman is the elected political leader of the village. In Parbatiya Hindu villages, the VDC chairman is elected mostly from higher caste families. L and K villages are not an exception. VDC stands for Village Development Committee, the lowest level political and administrative unit in Nepal.

³ Over the years, this family has generously accommodated me to live together with them every time I have returned to LK. This family continuously opened my eyes to the realities of life in rural Nepal. Furthermore, without their warmth and humor, I would not have been able to accomplish neither my development work nor my research.

⁴ A carefully carved rectangular flag-stoned platform with one or two sacred fig trees: *Ficus benghalensis*, the banyan, and/or *Ficus religiosa*, the pipal, planted (side by side) in the earthen center. *Chautara*'s are a public sitting place and provide shade for rest where one can unload luggage and sit down on their way to their destination. Furthermore, it functions as a venue for village assemblies and religious services. According to LK villagers, *chautara*'s in LK are centuries old, and have been planted by their far ancestors who had settled there, as an act of public service, or to earn religious merit. This unique institution can be found throughout villages in Nepal.

⁵ Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is an umbrella term for a wide range of similar approaches and methodologies, including Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Learning Methods (PALM), Participatory Action Research (PAR), Farming Systems Research (FSR), Méthod Active de Recherche et de Planification Participative (MARPP), and many others. The common theme to all these approaches is the full participation of people in the processes of learning about their needs and opportunities, and in the action required to address them. (International Institute for Environment and Development, 2003, at http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/whatispla.html)

⁶ A former staff of the Nepalese local NGO. She, a cheerful and brilliant woman, was born and raised in Kathmandu in a high caste household. In the beginning of the project phase, she accompanied me to LK numerous times to build rapport and work together with low caste women. Her attitude towards low caste women was based on friendship, and this not only opened the hearts of many low caste women in the area, but enabled them to experience an alternative relationship with a higher caste woman.

⁷ The reasoning for the lower status of the middle caste group compared to the high caste Parbatiya group is locally explained by the fact that the middle castes are from a different ethnic group, rather than the fact that they drink, which is the reasoning in the 1854 Mulki Ain.

⁸ The term of Brahmin in everyday use in LK.

⁹ The hierarchical order among low castes in LK is not consistent with the 1854 Mulki Ain that enacted caste hierarchy in Nepal. As mentioned, in LK, the Kami (blacksmiths) are higher than the Sarki (leatherworkers), whereas in the Mulki Ain Kami and Sarki are ranked as equals. This contradiction is locally explained by the fact that the work of a Sarki involves handling the carcasses of dead cows, bulls, and water buffalo, which is considerably impure; in contrast, blacksmiths have magical powers controlling natural elements such as earth, air, fire, and water. Cameron in her ethnographic study of Bhalara in the Bajhang District of the Seti Zone in far western Nepal, also points out that the ranking among low caste people there did not correspond to that in the 1854 Mulki Ain (Cameron 1998: 13).

CHAPTER 5

¹ *Aatmaa* in Nepali originally corresponds to ‘soul’. However, it also denotes ‘inner mind’, which is the meaning LK low caste women referred to in order to depict their conception on empowerment. This will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

² The exact translation of the term empowerment in Nepali is *sasaktikaran*, a new term in the development vocabulary of Nepal. *Sasakti* means able to do something and *Karan* means process. Literally, *sasaktikaran* is the process to become able to do something. In the development discourse so ubiquitous from the 1990’s in Nepal, *sasaktikaran* has been conceptualized as the process to bring out one’s full capability. However, when I started to work in LK in 1999 to implement LLIP together with my counterpart NGO, the term *sasaktikaran* had not entered into the LK vocabulary and low caste women were unfamiliar with it. To avoid jargon that would make them confused, my colleagues and myself restrained ourselves in introducing this new term in our development activities. Instead when we discussed the topic of empowerment with low caste women we expressed in ways that would be more familiar to them, such as sharing life stories of women leaders, explaining women’s rights, and conducting participatory workshops to facilitate and nurture their own capabilities to make decisions and affect outcomes that influence their daily lives. In LK, empowerment was practical not theoretical. Only during my final follow-up fieldwork in 2005, one year after the project phase, did I hear this term spoken, and that in an alien way, by leading members of the low caste women group in K village.

³ Apart from “inner mind”, when used in a secular context in LK, *aatmaa* can imply an individual’s “inner person” that influences one’s feelings, thoughts, and actions. I keep this translation of *aatmaa* here, since LK low caste women were using the term *aatmaa* as inner mind, not as inner person, when they depicted their conception on empowerment: the central theme of this study. Nevertheless, my understanding of *aatmaa* as inner mind emerged only after my understanding of *aatmaa* as inner person. Thus, I introduce two episodes I encountered in LK in translating this complex term as inner person. One young high caste woman confided in me about a beautiful necklace she did not own. She schemed to steal it, but could not, “my *aatmaa* would not allow me” she said. When I asked whether she can reject her *aatmaa*, she answered, “I can not fool my *aatmaa*. My *aatmaa* will weep.” On another occasion, I came across a low caste mother scolding her son who had eaten snacks without sharing it with his younger sister. His mother yelled, “You kill her (your sister’s) *aatmaa* and eat!” Her son retorted, “My *aatmaa* wanted it!” In both episodes, one’s *aatmaa* can be considered as an “inner person” who has feelings and thoughts, and regulates the executive or cognitive self. It also indicates that this “inner person” is influenced by other’s “inner person”.

⁴ My initials. I insert myself when transcribing interviews that revealed low caste women’s notions of empowerment, since their words emerged dialogically as I interacted with them.

⁵ Initials of Kesha Kumari Darjee. Hereafter, when transcribing interviews with low caste women on their notions of empowerment, I use the initials of the speaker likewise.

⁶ The loose end of sari usually draped over the left shoulder of the women who is wearing it. Often, low caste women when wearing a sari; unfold this loose end onto their hands to receive an object from a high caste person. This is because whenever a high caste person gives an object to a low caste person, the high caste person stands in a higher position whereas the low cast person crouches down to receive it. When positioned, the high caste person drops the object into the air towards the waiting hands of the low caste person. This procedure is one caste of conduct where high caste people avoid direct contact with low caste people who are considered to be polluted.

GLOSSARY

Aatma	Self, one's own self, executive or cognitive self, pertaining to the self. Used to emphasize one's individuality that is distinguished to be a separate existence from others. Also used to emphasize one's autonomy in one's feelings and/or one's thoughts, and actions.
Aatmaa	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The individual's "soul". In Hindu philosophy one's <i>aatmaa</i> is believed to transmigrate until it attains enlightenment. <i>Aatmaa</i> as "soul" is perceived to be a deity existence out of human control.2. The individual's "inner mind" that contains one's feelings and/or one's thoughts that influences one's self. When one feels negative emotions, such as sadness or fear, one's <i>aatmaa</i> deflates, and makes oneself negative and enervating. When one feels positive emotions, such as happiness, love, or satisfaction, one's <i>aatmaa</i> inflates, and makes oneself positive and activating. <i>Aatmaa</i> as inner mind interacts with self, others, internal and external events that are occurring in present life, and again relates to one's feelings and/or one's thoughts and constructs one's self. <i>Aatmaa</i> as inner mind is perceived to be a worldly and tangible existence.3. The individual's "inner person" that regulates one's feelings, thoughts, and actions, by giving direction to the executive or cognitive self. <i>Aatmaa</i> as inner person is perceived to be an existence in between a deity existence and worldly existence.
Aatma-bal	The individual's "inner power". An internal driving force to bring out one's capacity. When one has <i>aatma-bal</i> , one can determine and control one's own actions by one's own initiative.
Aatma-bisvasa	Self-confidence
Aatma-nibharra	Self-dependence
Aatma-sammana	Self-respect

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JAPANESE SUMMARY

エンパワーメントの概念：ネパール社会におけるローカーストの女性の内的変化

本稿は、ネパール王国パルバット郡の2か村LKにおけるローカーストの女性たちのエンパワーメント概念を女性たち自身が提示した「アトゥマ」（内なる心）と「アトゥモ」（自己）を使って分析することを目的とする。この調査は、女性一人一人の個別のインタビュー、グループディスカッション、ワークショップによってその語りをひとつひとつ拾い集め、彼女たちのエンパワーメントを概念化する。

1999年から2004年の5年間、ローカーストの女性を対象としたリーダーシップと生活改善事業を行なった。当時、村には、カースト制度や女性蔑視の思想という伝統的な慣習が根強く残っていた。そのため、村のローカーストの女性はカーストとジェンダーという2つのヒエラルキーの下に位置し、2重の差別を受けていた。そして、彼女たちもその差別を受け入れ、自分たちは「何もできない女性」として、自らを位置付けていた。

しかし、5年後の現在、ローカーストの女性たちは、NGOのトレーナーや村の委員会のメンバー、学校の先生になり、女性たち自身も女性たちを取り巻く環境も大きく変化した。この変化をエンパワーメントとして捉えた。そして、この変化を自己、世帯、コミュニティの3つのレベルに分け、女性たちの自身の変化、世帯内の変化、コミュニティの変化のプロセスを考察する。

女性たちは、自己の変化として、「アトゥマ（内なる心）」の増幅をあげた。プロジェ

クトに参加し、知識や技術を習得したり、他の女性たちを話し合ったりすることは、幸福感や満足感などプラスの感情をもたらし、自分自身に自信や尊厳が持てるようになったと語った。そして、その自信や尊厳は、新しい「アトゥモ（自己）」をもたらし、何もできない女性」と位置付けていた自らを「何かができる女性」として生まれ変わらせた。

世帯内の変化では、家族の自分に対する態度や行動が大きく変ったことをあげた。開発プロジェクトに参加して、学んだ知識を自分の家に持ちかえり、実践することで、「アトゥモ（自己）」を形成した。そして、女性たちの実践は、世帯全体に利益をもたらし、女性たちは、さらに自信を強め、「アトゥモ・バル（内なる力）」という内なる力を持つようになった。

コミュニティの変化では、「アトゥモ・バル」を持った女性が社会に働きかけることで、新たな役割と関係を作り上げた。女性たちは「何かができる女性」の姿を実行し、「アトゥモ・ニルバル（自己信頼）」や「アトゥモ・ビシュバサ（自信）」といった自己象を作り上げた。

これら3つの変化は常に他者との関係性の中で形成されるものである。女性たちが結束することで、新しい「アトゥモ（自己）」を作り上げた。そして、世帯内やコミュニティ内といった他者との関係の中で、「アトゥモ」を発展させていった。さらに、これらの女性の変化は、世帯やコミュニティの他のメンバーの力を奪うものではなく、世帯やコミュニティ全体に利益をもたらす変化であったため、彼らは女性たちの変化を許容した。

ローランドの規定した4つパワー、支配する能力（power over）；実行する能力（power to）；他者と共にあることで発揮される能力（power with）；自己尊厳（power within）にローカーストの女性たちのエンパワーメントを当てはめた。新しい「アトゥモ」も形成は、

実行する能力を生み出したといえる。そして、「アトゥマ」の発展は、他者と共に有ることで発揮される能力として捕らえることができる。「アトゥマ・ニルバル」や「アトゥモ・ビシュバシュ」自分や自分の行動に誇りを持つ自己尊厳と言える。しかし、ローカーストの女性たちは、自らの利益を優先して、他者の力を奪おうとはしていないため、支配する能力は求めている。

その結果、LKにおけるローカーストの女性のエンパワーメントは、他者の利益や地位を奪うことで自らの目的を達成するのではなく、他者との共存を図り、村や世帯の利益を優先した上で、自らの目的を達成している。そして、女性たち自身の言葉でエンパワーメントを捕らえ、表現することでエンパワーメントを自らの糧にすることができるのである。