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Review of 'Nepali Mediama Dalit: Sahabagita Ra
Bisayabastu (Dalit in the Nepali Media:
Participation and the Content)' by J. B.
Bishwokarma

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Book Reviews



Nepali Mediama Dalit: Sahabhagita Ra Bisayabastu (Dalit in the Nepali Media: Participation and the Content)

J. B. Bishwokarma. Kathmandu, Nepal: Martin Chautari, 2013. 152 pages. ISBN 978-99-375-9402-8.

Reviewed by Ramesh Sunam

The past decade has witnessed a body of scholarship on different social and political facets of the Dalits, perhaps the most marginalized and economically deprived social group in Nepal. While the mediascape has profoundly expanded in post-1990 Nepal, there is paucity of scholarly work on the inclusion of Dalits in the media. This book by J. B. Bishwokarma addresses this paucity with a contribution that broadens and deepens our understanding of the way the Nepali media represents Dalits and their issues.

This book is highly valuable for three reasons. First, the book is the first of its kind to analyze the Nepali media from a Dalit perspective. It offers a rich analysis of the media content and the participation of Dalits in both print and electronic media: newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Bishwokarma recognizes the potential role of the media in informing and shaping discourse about social inclusion and justice, and in putting pressure on the state and private sector to be responsive and accountable to the marginalized. But, as the author highlights, the media sector itself suffers from severe problems

of social exclusion. He presents some important findings, such as the fact that the state controlled Nepal Television (NTV) and Radio Nepal broadcast no Dalit-focused programs on their own, let alone employ Dalits in their newsrooms. Second, closely linked to the first point, the book provides a benchmark study that offers rich data about different types of news serving the Dalit community and Dalit participation in the media. In the book, one can easily find figures on the number, type and nature of Dalit related news published in the national daily newspapers and broadcasted on television or radio. Also available are the number of Dalits working at different echelons of the Nepali media organizations. These figures will be a valuable resource for future researchers.

Third, the book proposes avenues for restructuring the Nepali media in order to adequately respond to the question of the representation of Dalits and their issues. Bishwokarma sees three sets of problems in ensuring the inclusion of Dalits in the media. First, the control of the media—meaning both ownership and newsroom control—is beyond the reach of Dalits. Second, cultural values and norms often deter Dalits and their issues from being disseminated through the media. Third, organization policies and behaviour of the media industry are not Dalit-friendly. To address these issues, the author advocates for inclusive media in terms of promoting diversity and social justice. According to Bishwokarma, both the

state and media houses should have policies to ensure the representation of Dalits at the decision-making level and to provide adequate coverage of Dalit issues, including allocating a separate regular column for the Dalit community.

Simply put, this book contributes to (re)shaping media discourse around two questions: who controls the media and whose voices are circulated in the media? Nevertheless, there are four issues which I consider fundamental that have compromised the analytical and methodological rigour of this significant work. First, the author could be more strategic while selecting cases for his analysis. For instance, while Bishwokarma exposes the downsides of Dalit magazines such as their limited outreach, short-lived nature, and poor quality, he fails to examine other Nepali magazines – *Nepal*, *Himal* and *Mulyankan* – as these magazines have a wider reader base with a potentially more influential role in shaping public discourses. Further, alternative forms of the media have provided an alternative outlet for the people at the margins, challenging the exclusive authority and expertise of professional journalists. The author could analyze select blogs, such as Mysansar, which have given considerable attention and coverage to Dalit issues on many occasions. The case of Belbari is a vivid example here. Mysansar first publicized the case of a Dalit woman being seriously manhandled by upper castes in her own village and continued with subsequent updates. Initially the

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Ramesh Sunam on *Nepali Mediama Dalit: Sahabagita Ra Bisayabastu*

mainstream media turned a deaf ear to this case. However, they later took up this case and it made the headlines. Similarly, the author could illuminate the lived experience of Dalit journalists or prospective journalists as has been done in the analysis of Dalit radio journalists. Such stories uncover enablers and barriers affecting the inclusion of Dalits in the Nepali media sector.

Second, the author provided a general political and socio-economic context of Dalits at the outset. He writes, “*uniharule sram garebapat nagad paudainan. Uniharu soshanmulak sramma aadharit balighare, haliya, khalo, haruwa, charuwa lagayatka prathama bachna bibas chhan*” (“They are not paid cash for their labour. They are compelled to live with exploitative caste-related labour relations such as *balighare, haliya, khalo, haruwa* and *chrauwa*”) (p. 5). This reviewer challenges such construction of Dalit identity that only reproduces ascribed, old identities of Dalits. Many Dalits have done a lot to be represented differently, enduring all sorts of discrimination and exploitation over many years. Many forms of exploitative caste relations are receding, and Dalits are increasingly pursuing other forms of livelihood strategies including foreign labour migration. They are in fact creating new identities, exercising their (constrained) agency.

Third, in some instances, the author could further his analysis to challenge the dominant view, which I would call the ‘upper caste view’.

The author quotes Sudhir Sharma, the chief editor of a popular national daily in Nepal as saying: “...we are committed to give priority to Dalits for employment but we received no applications from Dalits” (p. 45). The news coordinator of Nepal Television (NTV) expresses a similar view (p. 126). I doubt these claims that no applications were lodged from Dalit journalists, as about five percent of the total 8,013 members of the Nepal Press Council are Dalits. More importantly, some influential journalists, namely Yubraj Ghimire, Sudhir Sharma and Gunaraj Luitel, in the interviews with the author have expressed serious concern about the under-representation of Dalits and their concerns in the media. Still, the author could consider how many editorials and op-eds/news they have written, which could help illuminate how sensitive media entrepreneurs are in creating space for Dalit issues, not to mention about recruiting Dalit candidates in their organizations.

Finally, what makes the state and media houses responsive and sensitive to the issues of Dalits? In the final words of the book, the author highlights the importance of Dalit movements. However, he doesn’t explain why Dalit movements fail to pursue this issue on their agenda for movements. This reviewer, a close observer of Dalit movements in Nepal, has not seen any Dalit activists or Dalit NGOs staging protests for inclusive media.

Taking everything together, J. B. Bishwokarma has written an eloquent book that is useful for Dalit NGOs, social activists, academics and those interested in the sociology of media. Its contents and breadth of vision are impressive. I suggest that the publisher produce an English version of this book to reach wider readers in South Asia and beyond.

Ramesh Sunam is a Ph.D. candidate at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University. His main research interests are poverty dynamics, social exclusion, labour migration, and environmental governance.