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Research Article

Using Vignettes to Explore Caste Attitudes in Central Nepal

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the attitudes of young persons in Nepal toward caste using completed short stories, or 'vignettes', that imagine situations involving intercaste couples. A total of around 230 stories were gathered from 2018 to 2019. The study, conducted among Class 11 and 12 students in around a dozen schools in central Nepal, covered a mixture of rural and urban locations. The results were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis used simple statistical techniques (p values) to test whether there were statistically significant differences in story outcomes based on author and story characteristics. The analysis suggests, tentatively, that young people do not see caste as a barrier to relationships. The qualitative analysis of tropes and themes illuminated new framings of caste that are now prominent, including narratives that may reflect social change that occurred in the civil war period, and in the rise of identities focused on 'merit' and 'achievement' in the sphere of work rather than on ascriptive identities like caste and ethnicity.

Keywords

Caste; social inclusion; identity; marriage; social transformation

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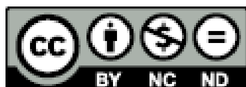

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Introduction

There is a paucity of empirical research on social attitudes toward caste and, in particular, on intercaste relationships at the grassroots in Nepal. There have, of course, been important recent monographs and collections of papers on the dalit situation (Bennett 2006; Bishokarma 2019; Guneratne 2010; Luintel 2018). These monographs compare the dalit's access to state and market resources with higher-caste groups and trace the histories of dalit movements, legal challenges to caste discrimination, and interactions with political parties and with Nepal's new federal political structures. In addition, dalit activist literature (Aahuti 2010; Kisan 2005) has focused on the history of dalit social movements and the relation of Nepal's dalit struggle to the thought of Ambedkar and to the communist ideology of the Maoist insurgency of the 1990s. The data these studies have used is of a macro nature, drawn from national census data and some data on economic and educational participation – with the exception of Adhikari and Gellner's (2019) recent study on the impact of labor migration on caste attitudes, which uses detailed survey data from several locations. Otherwise, at the local level, these studies have tended to use anecdotal case studies, small-scale focus group studies, or traditional social surveys to get at social attitudes to caste.

By contrast, the literature on the dalit experience in India is rich in all kinds of data. For example, browsing the tables in Thorat and Newman (2010: vii–xi) provides just one example from a relatively recent monograph of a panoply of data drawn from multiple sources: India-wide government surveys of business ownership broken down by caste; consumer expenditure data by caste; Indian Institute of Development Studies household surveys on discrimination patterns (531 villages in 5 states); and nationwide occupational surveys broken down by caste and countless well-funded academic surveys on all dimensions of caste attitudes and caste exclusion with high N samples. Given that the dalit in Nepal has not experienced the specific forms of political empowerment—via dalit-led political parties and government affirmative action—that they have in India, the gap in the scholarly literature on caste in India and Nepal is significant, although Nepal could be a crucial 'laboratory' for the comparative study of caste, as has been pointed out recently (Gellner et al. 2020: 92).

In 2020 the pressing issue of caste discrimination in Nepal was highlighted by incidents of caste-based violence in the western region.[1] It is therefore of some urgency to know more about attitudes to caste in Nepal and try to fill the gap in grassroots-level information. The current paper, which uses vignettes (respondent-completed short stories) to try and get at caste attitudes among young Nepalese, is a small step in this direction, although as I highlight in the implications section the real advantage of this study is that it provides a template for future studies which will cover a wider geographical area, including those parts of western Nepal where caste violence has recently been most prominent.

The Use of Vignettes in Social Science Studies of Attitudes

As defined by Sadi and Basit (2016: 183), vignettes "are short descriptions of a person or a social situation on which the respondents build their judgment or response". The advantages of using vignettes in social science studies of attitudes are many. They allow participants to take a depersonalized (third-person) view of sensitive topics that might reveal social norms more frankly than asking for attitudes in a survey where social desirability bias may impact results (Sampson and Johannessen 2020: 10; Schoenberg and Ravdal 2000: 66). They provide a way to combine relatively large N sample sizes with contextualized and ethnographically rich data (Sadi and Basit 2016). They allow the potential for strategically varying key information in the vignettes to 'test' for attitudinal differences or, in effect, to 'control' for various independent variables—such as age, gender, race, or caste—for both the imaginary characters of the vignette and for the authors of the

completed vignettes (Carifio 1989; Finch 1987).

Perhaps surprisingly, vignettes remain underutilized in general social science studies of attitudes and beliefs and are more commonly used in public health, mental health, and educational research where sensitive topics such as institutional abuse, racism, and disparate behavior in service delivery are being examined. I could find no previous published studies that applied the vignette methodology to caste attitudes, with the important exception of an unpublished study presented by Steven Folmar at the South Asian Studies Conference (Folmar 2014).[2]

There are methodological drawbacks to the use of vignettes which this current study is not free from: while vignettes may reveal general social norms, they are less well adapted to revealing the likely behavior of individuals (Finch 1987), although Barter and Renold (2000: 311) show a correlation between attitudes revealed in vignettes and real-world behaviors. In other words, while a study such as this can tell us about the generic narrative discourses ('tropes'), norms, and generally accepted social attitudes to caste at a particular time and place, it should not be interpreted as telling us how young Nepalese people actually behave in social interactions related to caste. In Corkey's terms (1992: 256), the "simulation" of social reality represented in a vignette can make normative social codes or habitus "visible" even if it cannot tell us whether a particular individual will behave in harmony with that code. In the case of caste in Nepal this gap between what the vignette authors 'say' and what they might 'do' may be particularly problematic, because the study may only be making visible the 'official' codes associated with a modernizing polity overtly hostile to caste discrimination—as seen in school textbooks, social and mainstream media, television shows, and party-political propaganda. Even if this is the case, I believe vignettes can reveal points of tension within that official narrative where traditional caste attitudes or habitus collide with official anti-caste views, or at the very least it can tell us how 'effectively' that official anti-caste narrative has implanted itself in the minds of the young authors of the vignettes so that elements of that narrative reassemble themselves unbidden in a writing exercise.

The other key drawback of vignettes arises from the sheer difficulty of constructing a plausible social scenario that attracts the interest of participants while not veering into melodrama and in which the key informational elements are understood by a high percentage of respondents. As Barter and Renold argue (2000: 319), a vignette scenario must be "real and conceivable" but also interesting enough to evoke an affective response. In the next section I discuss the formulation of the vignette(s) used in this study in the light of this tension.

Designing the Vignette

Barter and Renold (2000) argue that a vignette should be simple and comprehensible and be given sufficient context for elaboration, avoid 'eccentric' scenarios, and provide a 'third-person' viewpoint so as to reduce social desirability biases. I broadly followed this useful framework in designing the vignette I used in this study. Together with two research assistants from the dalit community, I wrote a very short introduction to a story to be completed by respondents. We tested this vignette on young people known to the assistants to check for informational problems, especially in recognition of caste names in the stories and in understanding the basic scenario. The scenario chosen was as follows.

> X (male) and Y (female) are in love. They met in their first year of college (Bachelor of Arts). They decide to elope. On the day that they are eloping to Pokhara, (Y's) father sees them getting on a bus at the New Bus Park in Kathmandu. **What happens next?**

This scenario was chosen to elicit the interest of the young people who were

responding and to resonate with potential real-life experiences they or their friends may have had. The wording was deliberately simple and the introduction short, to avoid adding levels of complexity. The danger was that the scenario would be too melodramatic, thus eliciting responses that emphasize the soapoperatic or 'Bollywood' elements of the story. Some responses did indeed fit that description. However, it was decided that less dramatic scenarios, such as stories involving intercaste friendship or workplace situations, might be less likely to engage respondents emotionally. In addition, if the essence of the endurance of caste is persistent endogamy, then a vignette which addresses a threat to endogamy is more likely to elicit caste-based affect. This choice has the drawback of not capturing the more subtle forms of everyday discrimination associated with commensality prohibitions—sharing food, entering the homes of people of other castes, etc.—which need to be studied using other methods, such as surveys and direct observation.

The basic story was varied by the caste group of the characters to create *de facto* 'controls' to test for potential differences in response based on the caste of the imaginary characters (Table 1).

In Nepal, last names reflect caste identity: Devkota and Neupane are recognizable as upper-caste (usually Brahmin) names, while BK (Bishokarma) is widely recognizable as a dalit or lower-caste name. One of Nepal's *janajati* (hill-based ethnic minorities), the Tamang community is not perceived as untouchable by the upper castes, but they occupy a lower-middle stratum in caste-status hierarchies (Rai 2011). This Tamang version was included to try to measure whether there was a difference in rigidity between the fundamental boundary of caste Hindu and 'untouchable' and the boundary between caste Hindu and *janajati*. Two versions include a Brahmin-dalit match (with genders varied) because this was the situation of most analytical interest. Version 1, with an upper-caste daughter rather than a son, was used more often than Version 2 (with the genders reversed) based on the assumption that caste 'honor' would be more perturbed by a match between an upper-caste female and a lower-caste male. There was no statistical difference between responses based on the gender of the upper-caste child.

Version 4 counts as the 'control' in this study, since it features a Brahmin-Brahmin match, while versions 1–3 feature intercaste relationships, whether involving a

Table 1: Different Versions of the Vignette

Version 1

Bishal BK and Sajita Devkota are in love. They met in the first year of college, studying BA. They decide to elope together. On the day that they are eloping to Pokhara, Sajita's father sees them getting on a bus at the New Bus Park in Kathmandu. What happens next?

Version 2

Suraj Devkota and Sajita BK are in love. [same story, Suraj's father sees them]

Version 3

Suraj Tamang and Sajita Devkota are in love. [same story, Sajita's father sees them]

Version 4

Sajita Devkota and Suraj Neupane are in love. [same story, Sajita's father sees them]

Brahmin-Bishokarma match or a Brahmin-Tamang match. In other words, the control can be used to measure whether outcomes of the story—positive or negative—are due merely to the elopement scenario or to the castes of the characters in the story. I was able to gather 184 completed vignettes from spring 2017 to summer 2018. I obtained 71 stories from 4 rural schools in Sindhupalchok District and 113 from 5 urban schools in Kathmandu. Students did the exercise during free or lunch periods under the supervision of their usual teachers and they were instructed that the exercise was about 'love marriage'. The aim of this prompt was to decenter caste as the object of the exercise and therefore hopefully avoid socially desirable responses that did not reflect actual worldviews. I was not present for the exercise, with the intention of making the exercise feel more a part of normal school routine, and also reducing the possible biases introduced by the presence of a western researcher. Teachers were provided copies of the varied texts and instructed to distribute them randomly to students. Unless they asked, the teachers were not themselves told that caste was the focus of the study, again to avoid priming students. The 184 vignettes had the names of their student-authors, because we had requested names to test for differences in response based on the caste of the respondents, but the downside of this was that social desirability bias may have been accentuated.

In order to create another 'control', I added a further 32 vignettes from a rural school in Sindhupalchok District in 2019. These vignettes were anonymous. The anonymous vignettes were analyzed to see whether anonymity made a systematic difference to responses. Based on initial trial runs it was assumed that most students would 'recognize' the caste names used in the vignette introduction, and in more than 50% of versions 1–3, caste was *explicitly* mentioned by the authors. In many more than 50% the emotive force and terminology of the story—for example, referencing 'tradition' versus love—suggested caste had been recognized and was affecting the composition. But I did not check caste awareness with students first, precisely because I did not want to prime students to see the exercise as explicitly about caste. In a few cases (N = 11) there was clear mis-recognition of caste – for example two students thought a Devkota-Neupane pairing was of upper and lower caste, so those stories were re-categorized. Apart from these cases, rather than make subjective judgments about whether the vignette authors had recognized the caste differences involved, it seemed more methodologically sound to analyze all the vignettes, whether or not the authors explicitly mentioned or alluded to caste in their responses.[3]

Class 11 and 12 students (usually ages 16–19) were chosen because it was felt that older respondents such as undergraduate or graduate students would more easily recognize the 'purpose' of the exercise and be more likely to write generic answers in accordance with social desirability bias. In addition, university students would skew toward a middle-class demographic. On the other hand, younger children would be less likely to recognize caste identities or to have had much exposure to discussions about caste norms in their family or community. Also, for Class 11 and 12 students, engaging with somewhat controversial topics in class is not new, whereas for younger students it would have been ethically contentious to introduce such topics outside of a broader pedagogical context.

Analyzing Completed Vignettes: Quantitative Analysis

Stories were written in Nepali, except for students at an elite private school in Kathmandu, who wrote in English, their usual writing idiom. I listened to an assistant reading the stories slowly in Nepali, and personally translated them, asking for assistance with vocabulary and nuance as needed, especially in relation to possible literary allusions in the stories. I then analyzed the stories, trying to categorize them according to the basic story outcomes they illustrated.

In a first cut at categorizing the vignettes, four typical narrative outcomes emerged.

1. Unhappy outcome (death of one or other character by murder or suicide, forced separation, the girl forced to marry into the same caste, or feelings of disillusion after marriage)
2. Run away outcome (the couple elope successfully but are never reconciled to their families or communities in the long term)
3. Happy outcome (parents agree to a marriage in the near future or instantly, sometimes with some simple conditions attached, such as getting consent from both sets of parents)
4. Wait outcome (the young couple agree to wait until they have finished their studies and/or have entered professional employment)

I also grouped outcomes 1 and 2 under the heading 'negative outcome' and outcomes 3 and 4 as 'positive outcome' in order to simplify tabulation.

These outcomes were then matched to the caste of the characters in all the versions of the story to see if patterns emerged. Specifically, the outcomes could be tested against the following null hypothesis: *unhappy or negative outcomes should be no more likely in mixed-caste pairings than in same-caste pairings.* Of course, this statistical test does not prove or disprove the existence of caste-based attitudinal bias since it may also reflect a realistic assessment by the authors of the problems likely to be faced by mixed-caste couples in their communities. Only a closer qualitative analysis, as conducted below, can get at the attitudinal elements revealed by the vignettes. However, the test probably captures something of the objective social norms present in the writers' communities and families: if authors foresaw a negative outcome, then it may reflect underlying prejudice toward lower-caste persons, whether that is endorsed by the authors or not. What cannot be ascertained is whether that underlying prejudice was held personally by the authors.

Table 2: Vignette Outcomes as Percentage of Stories in each category

Story categories	Rural Schools (N = 71)	Urban Schools (N = 113)	Total (N = 184)
Unhappy ending for Dalit – upper-caste couples (versions 1 and 2)	27	35	**32**
Unhappy ending for Tamang – upper-caste couples (version 3)	0	43	**29**
Unhappy ending for all mixed-caste couples (versions 1,2,3)	21	38	**38**
Unhappy ending for upper-caste couples (version 4)	26	18	**21**
Negative outcome (unhappy plus run away) for dalit–upper caste couples	49	54	**52**
Negative outcome for all mixed-caste couples	42	53	**48**
Negative outcome for Brahmin–Brahmin couples	53	30	**38**
Positive outcome (happy plus wait) for all mixed-caste couples	58	48	**52**
Positive outcome for Brahmin–Brahmin couples	47	70	**62**

Table 2 presents selected results based on pairing outcomes with the versions of the story. Note that the numbers in the boxes of the table are the percentage of stories that fall into that category, not raw numbers of stories. For purposes of simplicity, I have only included the 'happy' and 'unhappy' outcomes for separate analysis. The 'wait' and 'run away' outcomes are included in the broader 'positive' and 'negative' results.

In each total category (but not in rural schools alone) the Brahmin-Brahmin vignettes showed fewer negative outcomes than the mixed-caste and Brahmin–lower-caste couples. However, tests for statistical significance suggest no meaningful difference.

In order to test for statistical significance, I ran p value tests. The p value is the probability of obtaining test results at least as extreme as the results actually observed, under the assumption that the null hypothesis is correct. In this study the null hypothesis was that there is no difference in story outcomes based on the caste of the characters in the different versions of the vignette. When I ran a few p tests for significance using the raw data—with the null hypothesis that positive and negative outcomes should be equally distributed by caste—none of the pairings achieved statistical significance. For the comparisons with the Brahmin-Brahmin control group, typically the p value was 0.2–0.3, meaning the difference in outcomes could have emerged by chance 20%-30% of the time if they were generated randomly. Some of this may be an artifact of a small or an atypical sampling of rural schools, where the Brahmin-Brahmin pairings seem 'unusually' unhappy and the Tamang-Brahmin pairings 'unusually' happy. Indeed, using only urban figures the p values look a bit closer to significant—for example, total negative outcomes for the Brahmin-Brahmin grouping compared with the mixed-caste grouping had a p value of 0.11 for urban stories alone, meaning that for those urban responses there was only about a 10% chance that the results would have been as skewed as they were toward same-caste positive outcomes. This rather surprising result—urban samples showed more negativity to mixed-caste couples—may resonate with the qualitative analysis below, which shows how certain tropes connected to Maoism and rural activism may be more prominent in some rural areas than in urban ones.[4]

The lack of a statistically significant finding, with the proviso that in urban schools there may be a slight bias observable, is of course meaningful, because it suggests that caste is *not* the overwhelming factor when young people imagine whether relationships will go well or not. In addition, no statistically meaningful difference existed between rural and urban schools—despite the 'common-sense' intuition that caste attitudes should be more 'progressive' in urban areas.

When outcomes were broken down *by the caste of the story author*—about 85% of last names could be assigned to caste groups without ambiguity—the results were as follows (Table 3).

Table 3: Outcomes by Caste of Author As Raw Numbers (N = 167)

Caste of Author	Negative Outcomes in story (Unhappy and run away)	Positive Outcomes in story (Happy and wait)
Upper (Brahmin-Chettri-Newar)	For mixed caste: **40**	For mixed caste: **49**
	For Brahmin-Brahmin: **16**	For Brahmin-Brahmin: **17**
Other (Janajati-Madhesi-dalit)	For mixed caste: **16**	For Mixed Caste: **21**
	For Brahmin-Brahmin**: 1**	For Brahmin-Brahmin: **7**

Here the percentage data is clear enough without the need to run p value tests. This table suggests that higher-caste authors did not perceive the relationships differently based on the caste of the characters, or at least did not write as if they did!

Adding a Control Group for Author Anonymity

I presented an early version of this paper at the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya in 2019. There, several audience members suggested that a further control should be run to explore whether the anonymity of vignettes affected responses, because it is possible that under the cover of anonymity respondents may be more likely to express their 'true' attitudes to intercaste relationships. Therefore, in 2019, I ran a control with another 32 vignettes from a rural school in Sindhupalchok District. The results are presented below (Table 4).

Table 4: Data from Anonymously Written Vignettes as Percentages (raw number total = 32)

	Positive Outcome (Happy / Wait)	**Negative Outcome (Unhappy / Run Away)**
Same-caste couples	75	25
Mixed-caste couples	59	41

Given the small sample, all from one school, and an especially small control group of same-caste characters, it is hard to draw definitive conclusions, but it is notable that the percentage of positive outcomes for mixed-caste couples (59%) was actually higher than in the total sample of vignettes with named authors (52%, as noted in Table 2).

Qualitative Analysis of the Vignettes

Quantitative analysis can reveal only so much about caste attitudes in the vignettes. Arguably of greater analytic value is qualitative exploration of the various discourses contained in the vignettes. Discourse analysis provides a thicker understanding of norms related to caste and contextualizes how caste was seen by the authors in relation to such contexts as authority, tradition, development, and national identity.

It was surprisingly straightforward to isolate certain tropes which appeared in vignettes across settings, although some were more common in rural than in urban schools.

Below I discuss discourses in two groups—broadly 'anti-caste' discourses, which I label 'achievement', 'modernity', 'textbook', 'persuasion', and 'repentance' – followed by discourses that emphasize the persistence of caste difference: 'violence', 'patriarchal wisdom', and 'outright caste-ism'. The examples chosen are the ones where caste was explicitly invoked—unlike in the quantitative analysis, where all vignettes were analyzed whether they explicitly invoked caste or not. Obviously, some of these discourses may be seen also in the 'control' group of the Brahmin-Brahmin couple—in particular the cliched 'achievement' discourse, which advises 'waiting' for marriage until achievement status is reached—but in this section I am leaving aside the control group because only the authors' explicit meditations on caste are being considered.

The 'Achievement' Discourse

This discourse was included in the tables above as 'wait', meaning that the couple should wait until they have better education and jobs before marrying. The 'wait' discourse could be described as a subset of a broader 'achievement' discourse, recurring

in the vignettes, which emphasized achieving an educated, middle-class status rather than 'traditional' value orientations. Below is a nicely illustrative example of such a story in the Brahmin girl-dalit boy version (summarized).

> The father got angry when he heard the word 'BK'; he made his daughter block the boy on social media. The father is a 'rich, prestigious businessman and [is] caste-ist'. Five years later the BK boy becomes a millionaire running a cement company.[5] The boy meets the father on business. The father apologizes to the boy and the couple marry with his permission.

This story was unusually direct in its humorous opposition of a bourgeois, achievement-oriented attitude to a caste narrative. A more typical example, summarized below, is thematically similar (Brahmin girl, Tamang boy).

> The father caught his daughter forcefully, and scolded her: "You are only 19. This is not the age to marry, this is a time to study, and besides, his caste is not similar to ours. If you marry him society will insult us and will lower out prestige." But she insisted, "I want to marry or I will die." But the father did not change his mind. However, after a while, the father tired of her complaints and called [the boy] to the house. He talked to both and said: "First study well and after getting educated we will think about it." They were happy and focused on their education. After completing studies, the boy got a good job and the father gave his daughter to him.

This story illustrates the father's transformation from focusing on a traditional ascriptive status to an achievement-based status. Many vignettes of this kind started with the father concerned about *ijaat* (honor or prestige) under perceived threat, and then being won over to an alternate set of values focused on education and employment status, so that *ijaat* could be conserved in a new form—that of educational capital and the employability of children.

The Modernity and 'Textbook' Discourses

In these vignettes, the authors explicitly contrast 'caste values' to 'modern' values in a binary opposition. For example (female Dalit, male Brahmin):

> Because the kids were educated they tried to explain the situation to the father: "We are of the same class – we can sustain ourselves. Because of caste there is no development in Nepal. In the world there is no discrimination among foreigners." The father heard them and realized that they were correct, and that we shouldn't think of caste and should work toward development, and he allowed them to marry.

This discourse repeatedly sets terms such as *adhunik* (modern) and *bikas* (development) against caste-oriented attitudes, somewhat naively setting a 'developed' world, devoid of such prejudice, against the 'traditional' world of the Nepali village. At times, vignettes in this category could be termed 'textbook' denunciations of caste, often containing language such as follows (from a male dalit, female Brahmin vignette):

> [The girl's father's words] "I don't care about high and low – all humans are the same – if you love a dalit it is not a mistake. The mistake is to hide your love."

Others speak in a direct authorial voice to make the couples' plight an exemplary plea for modern values (male Brahmin, female Dalit):

> Because of caste this young couple died at a young age [of double suicide]. We should have been developing our state instead of disenfranchizing [*adhikar bhachhit*] our people.

These 'textbook' appeals to non-caste values drew either on a political vocabulary of rights and development and modernity or on quotations from great poets which are well known from textbooks, in particular, Laxmi Prasad Devkota's lines to the extent that *manish thulo dil le hunccha, jaat le hudaina* (people are great by their heart not by caste).

The Persuasion and Repentance Discourses

A more dramatic discourse, that overlaps in content with 'achievement' and 'modernity' but which takes those blunt oppositions of values in a more dialogic direction, is 'persuasion'. In this type of narrative, the child, usually the daughter, or even police officers or friends of the family intervene in the argument and actively change the mind of the father about caste difference. For example, this vignette (male Dalit, female Brahmin):

> The father asks what is she doing on the bus with an unknown boy: "He's a lower-caste boy – we'll have to cut you off from our family." His daughter replies: "It's the 21st century! Nowadays people don't talk about caste. Love doesn't know caste. Our love is deep – we can be an example to society. Laxmi Prasad Devkota said: 'Great by heart not caste.'" The father regrets his anger and supports their relationship. Then, he argues with and convinces villagers who had been gossiping that "Blood is red – the caste system still exists" and allows the marriage after they have completed Master's level education.

In these persuasion narratives, the content of anti-caste discourses is persuasively applied to change the mind of the father figure. In the above extract the father then becomes an agent of change himself, chastising and persuading neighbors.

A number of stories (N = 10) followed a pattern in which the police intervened on the part of anti-caste ideas. These, perhaps surprisingly, outnumbered the few stories (N = 4) where the police were recruited by a caste-ist father to arrest the couple in Pokhara or beat up the lower-caste male. Below is an example, involving the police (male dalit, female Brahmin couple):

> The father takes the couple to the police station *jabardasti* (forcibly). He asks if they are in love. He tells the boy: "You have no similarities in culture, custom, religion, or caste." But the police take the father aside and tell him he's wrong in his attitude of discrimination. The couple marry and become an example of inter-caste marriage for the community. [Authorial comment]: "We should accept this kind of marriage and promote it."

Another version of persuasion involves a successful marriage as itself a form of persuasion (male Brahmin, female dalit):

> The father brought the couple home and was embarrassed because his neighbors saw the couple and held his family in a negative light. But the couple would not be discouraged. They eloped anyway and married. Eventually the parents saw the success of their marriage and became happy with it. Even the neighbors were won over by this example of *ramro jankari* (good information/awareness).

It was notable that 'persuasion' narratives were particularly common in rural schools (by a ratio of 2:1 compared to urban schools). Not just this, but particular rural schools provided a disproportionate number of examples of this kind of narrative. Speculatively speaking, this may be a legacy of political mobilization in some rural villages in Sindhupalchok (for example in the vicinity of Thulo Sriwari) where the vignettes were written. Some of the chosen locations were strongholds of the Maoist movement and the 'persuasion' trope echoes elements of communist

rhetoric in relation to caste. But this connection is hard to prove.

The 'repentance' narrative could be said to be a subset, or variant, of persuasion. In these vignettes, a tragic death of one or both of the couple causes a change of heart in the father:

> The father took them to the police, but they escaped. The villagers heard about the intercaste relationship and gossiped about it and father was upset at their talk. Finally, the police located the couple and when the father met them, he slapped his daughter, but the police intervened and stopped him. Soon after his daughter killed herself, followed shortly afterward by her lover. The father came to regret his actions and saw that caste shouldn't stand in the way of love. He organized programs of awareness about caste in his village.

As suggested above, this dialectic of tragedy and 'awareness' may be engrained in rural areas as a legacy of the civil war, and it was noticeable that this narrative was much less common in stories written by urban authors.

Caste-ist Narratives: Violence, patriarchal wisdom, and explicit caste-ism

These narratives could, preliminarily, be said to 'affirm' caste difference—either implicitly, by depicting a story that ends in violence or explicitly, by authorial comment that criticizes intercaste marriage.

Violent events imagined were (in order of frequency): grabbing the daughter/couple off the bus; suicide by one or both young people, and occasionally parents; locking away of the daughter against her will; murder of the boy by the father or by *gunda* (violent ruffians) paid by the father; or physical harm to the boy as a threat for him to stay away. Table 5 reports the frequency overall for violence in the stories.

Table 5: Incidence of Violence in the Stories (Total = 43 / 184*)

	Rural	Urban
Versions 1–3 (intercaste)	9	23
Version 4 (upper-caste couple)	5	6

Urban respondents were more likely to imagine violence than rural ones. Again, this is not quite statistically significant – excluding the upper-caste couple stories the p value is 0.14 – but closer to significance than most of the statistical comparisons undertaken above. However, there was no difference as a ratio between violence toward same-caste couples and intercaste couples. This lack of difference suggests that we cannot infer that violence in the stories reflects, in each case, an implicit 'judgment' about caste, since same-caste couples often met the same violent fate. The difference between urban and rural schools remains analytically interesting, but it may reflect an urban 'dramatizing' of social conflict that rural students were less prone to, and which has nothing directly to do with caste relations.

Of the 230 completed stories, including the anonymously authored stories, only three or four stories could be classified as explicitly endorsing anti-caste tropes or endorsing a 'traditional' defense of same-caste marriage. That qualification is important. An example of a narrative endorsing a caste stereotype is the following (male dalit, female Brahmin):

> The father asks his daughter "Who is that boy?" She lies: "We're just going to celebrate a friend's birthday." But she doesn't return. The dalit boy was a liar – a womanizer. A friend on the bus warns her about him but the girl doesn't listen. She then sees him with his ex-girlfriend. She regrets her elopement. She repents to dad. He forgives her.

Oddly, this story was one of the very few written by a (male) dalit student, so it may have had an ironic intent. The absence of other stories like this may be a positive sign that stereotypical views of intercaste marriage are waning among young Nepalis.

Another group of stories (N = 4 or 5, depending on how categorized) takes a more 'traditionalist' stance, in which the wisdom of the father is acknowledged, eventually, by the caste-transgressing couple. For example (female Brahmin, male Dalit):

> The father stopped the bus and took the couple aside. He asked his daughter whether she had considered caste. Did the boy not feel ashamed to have gone off with a Brahmin girl? … This is against culture, religion and tradition. A couple must be of the same caste. A dalit cannot care for an upper-caste partner. His daughter had to realize that family honor was at stake and a dark future faced her. It would be a waste of education if she ran off with him. The couple's eyes were opened [by this talk] and they decided to focus on their studies.

This is one of the rare examples where the invocation of traditional values is not complicated by a tragic outcome from the couple, leading to repentance or regret, or is not moderated by an authorial comment criticizing the father's stance.

Overall, however, and taking into account that violent outcomes cannot be directly connected to caste-ist motivations, it was striking how few directly caste-prejudiced narratives emerged from the study: the anonymous stories contained no higher proportion of 'caste-ist' narratives than the authored stories.

Implications and Potential for Follow-up Vignette Studies in Nepal

Substantively, the vignettes analyzed in this study revealed the following key trends:

- Young people, especially in rural areas, are highly conscientized about caste discrimination and have absorbed tropes of 'awareness', perhaps as a result of media campaigns and perhaps as a result of political campaigns which are a legacy of the civil war period (Bownas (2015) and Zhakevich (2019) discuss the possibly long lasting legacies of civil war–era awareness campaigns).
- Overt caste discriminatory attitudes are fairly rare in this age group, if one sets aside concerns about social desirability bias (which was addressed to some degree by adding a sample of anonymous vignettes).
- The 'drama' of modern versus traditional values is still a dominant narrative among young people in Nepal, and an optimistic narrative is common in which state authorities, including the police, are on the side of civil rights and agents of beneficial social transformation.
- The 'modern' narrative of caste equality is also a 'bourgeois' narrative of the work ethic of achievement-oriented identity and of its triumph over ascriptive identity. Education, professional employment, national development, and modernity cluster together in the vignettes in contrast to a 'traditional' realm of village gossips.
- Contrary to expectations, quantitative analysis suggested that caste attitudes, at least in relation to marriage, are more liberal in rural than in urban settings. The causes of this are unclear, but may include—speculatively—civil war–era conscientization and communist political influence more generally in the countryside, or the greater prevalence of upper 'bubbles' in urban areas, meaning that urban youth are less likely

to know lower-caste persons than in rural areas.

It should be noted that the geographical limitation of this study is both a drawback and an analytical opportunity. By confining samples to the central region of Nepal, and providing a relatively large number of samples drawn from many sites in that region, the study provides a somewhat plausible benchmark for attitudes to caste at a specific time and place as well as a comparative study of urban and rural areas. This benchmark can be used in future vignette studies to measure regional differences in caste attitudes across Nepal. Post Covid, it will be particularly rewarding to conduct the same exercise in the Terai (plains) region and the far western region of Nepal, where one would expect local caste politics to manifest in the narratives and in the statistical analysis of story outcomes.

The benchmark also provides a measure that can be used to look at changes over time. If a similar study were conducted at 10-year intervals, it would be interesting to observe changes in narratives. For example, it could be that the level of 'drama' associated with caste declines over this period, or it could be that the 'tradition versus modernity' narrative dissipates or is seen as less urgent by authors. Or, indeed, there could be evidence in future studies of the 'ethnicization' of caste identities in new kinds of narrative not seen in the current sample. Because the methodology is simple and transparent, hopefully researchers other than the author will be able to apply it in other regions, perhaps as a supplement to more traditional social scientific surveys on attitudes. Vignettes can also be scanned and shared across the research community and be available for other, perhaps more linguistically rich, forms of analysis.

More broadly, for social research in Nepal, the vignette method could easily be adapted to study over aspects of social inclusion and transformation. For example, the method could be used to study gender inclusion. Indeed, there are gendered aspects even of the vignettes used in this study—not least the fact that in no instance was the mother the agent of persuasion in the stories, although daughters sometimes were. Given Nepal's extreme diversity, many other social characteristics can be studied using the vignette method including regional origin, rural versus urban identity, religious identity, ethnic origin, language spoken, and occupational status. The method creates an archive of responses that are easily sharable with other researchers and are not prone to the principal-agent problems that arise when surveys are subcontracted to paid survey agents. Given the lack of funding for social research in Nepal, the method is also cost and time-effective.

Richard Bownas (PhD, Cornell University, 2012), researches issues related to caste, religion and development in Nepal. He has published several articles in relation to the Maoist movement in Nepal, post disaster recovery, caste discrimination and more recently is working on the sociology of Christian conversion in Nepal.

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Endnotes

1. The murder of six dalit men in May 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/13/nepal-to-investigate-dalit-killings-following-arranged-marriage-dispute (Accessed December 16, 2022)

2. It was from listening to this presentation and in subsequent conversations with Dr Folmar that the idea for the current study emerged.

3. In many cases it was very hard to judge whether caste was being explicitly invoked. For example, when authors referred to breaking 'traditions' they may have been alluding to the caste of the characters in the vignettes or to the general issue of 'love

marriage'. At times, the 'excessive' response of the parents in the vignettes was probably due to the intercaste scenario, but it is impossible to prove this. These cases were the minority, however, as in most instances caste was consciously invoked. Another reason to analyze all vignettes as a group rather than only those that explicitly invoked caste is that the experiment is designed in part to allow for unconscious biases that may have influenced authors' perceptions of the outcome of the story.

4. Another possible hypothesis is that social distance between castes may actually be higher in urban areas than in villages, although testing that is beyond the scope of this study.

5. The author must have been playing on 'BK Cement', which is not actually a dalit-run company.

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