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TRANSFORMATIONS OF GENDER AND CASTE DIVISIONS OF LABOR IN RURAL NEPAL: LAND, HIERARCHY, AND THE CASE OF UNTOUCHABLE WOMEN

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The article demonstrates how gender and caste divisions of labor in rural western Nepal have been historically linked with practices of social hierarchy and land distribution. Because of their low status in two hierarchies—caste and gender—untouchable women serve as handmaidens to the community's changing economic needs. Over the past century, their primarily artisan-related production has been replaced with a variety of paid agricultural and nonagricultural work in the increasingly capitalized agricultural economy. The consequent breakdown of secure intercaste patron-client relationships and increasing poverty are countered by women's increasing economic power.

Tara Devi shuffles slowly up the crumbling stone walkway. Her face is not visible as she bends forward, balances the overflowing basket of grass suspended across her back from its headstrap. Tara Devi is over sixty years of age, but she must work hard each day to provide for herself and her granddaughter, Kumari. This afternoon, during a few spare hours, she has gathered enough fodder to feed her cow so that Kumari might drink milk with her millet bread that evening. She is tired and hungry, having worked from early morning in the fields of her upper-caste patrons. Tara Devi is low caste, a widow, and has no land of her own. So, with the money she earned that morning she purchased a few measures of grain which she ground into flour at the watermill. The coarse flour bag sits at the bottom of her basket, nearly hidden by the wild grasses and shorn leaves she collected from the forest. Her sickle hangs lightly from the rope tied around her waist, folds of torn faded cotton skirt hiked up around it to make work and walking easier.

We have not seen each other since my return to Bhalara a few weeks back. I tried to visit her and her daughter Sita, a good friend of mine and a talented folksinger and composer whose many songs I had recorded five years ago. After years of abuse by her husband, Sita left him and moved in with her mother, to help her and raise Kumari. Tara Devi and Sita were not at their home when I went to call on them in the lower-caste hamlet behind the school. The neighbors did not tell me about Sita's death last spring. Perhaps they thought I knew.

Tara Devi hears my voice from the teashop and stops. The sun is setting and winter's evening chill sends a shiver through her sweaty chest

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and face. Our faces light up with radiant smiles when we see one another. "Namaste! How are you? How is your family?" She brings one hand down from the basket's strap and grabs my hand. Her head twitches, it has gotten worse, I think. We hold hands, look fondly into each other's eyes, I see tears welling up in her's. "My daughter died," she tells me, "so now it is just me and my granddaughter." I know what that means, crushing poverty with little hope. "I am sorry for you," I tell her. We talk about our lives of the past five years. Each mention of Sita brings tears. It is getting dark. "I have to feed the cow," Tara Devi says as she turns, adjusts the basket which stayed on her back during our short visit, and bends forward. Remembering something, she looks back at me. "Do you have any spare clothing, any torn pieces that you can give me? See these rags I must wear? It is *dharma* to give to old people, you know," she jokes.

THE POVERTY OF LOWER-CASTE people in Nepal's rural farming communities is the context in which their daily work lives must be understood. Tara Devi's landlessness and her labor within the community are the result of practices that have been transforming lower-caste families over the past century. Her situation is unique only in its extreme tragedy and the matrifocal quality of her household. Similar to other families of lower caste is how her daily wage labor is shaped by her gender and her caste. It is the history of these labor patterns to which I now turn.

GENDER, CASTE, AND LABOR IN THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF SOUTH ASIA

The majority of studies on South Asia which explicitly address gender focus on the ideal roles of Brahmin, Chetri, or ethnic women within Hindu ideology and society (Allen 1982; Bennett 1983; Sharma 1980; Trawick 1990). Most authors acknowledge the generally low social status of women in Hindu society, indicated by women's lack of inheritance rights, preferential treatment of males over females in the areas of health and education, Hindu ideologies of the impure and dangerous female, and, in the extreme, female infanticide (B. Miller 1981). However, no studies start from a theoretical model of the relationship between gender and caste in society; most studies are directed toward the roles, position, and status of women only. Furthermore, the predominant focus on women of upper caste does little to advance our understanding of women of lower caste, nor our understanding of the similarities and differences in the hierarchies of gender and caste. The implied portrait of untouchable women by South Asianists is that due to their ritual impurity, they have more freedom and autonomy and fewer social and behavioral restrictions than women of high caste (Dumont 1970; Allen 1982; Kolenda 1982; Bennett 1983; Sharma 1980).

What about women in Nepal? Most of the ethnographic literature on Nepal is about non-Hindu ethnic minorities.¹ Notable exceptions to the predominantly Tibeto-Burman model of Nepalese people are studies by Bennett (1983),

Acharya and Bennett (1981), Borgstrom (1980), Cameron (1995), and A.P. Caplan (1972). Here again, with the exception of Cameron (1995), these studies address women of high caste only and implicitly or explicitly relegate lower-caste persons into a residual category of "untouchables and others" (Bennett 1983; Acharya and Bennett 1981) and victims of upper-caste political machinations (A.P. Caplan 1972; Borgstrom 1980). In Himalayan ethnography, people of low caste have not been treated as political, social, and cultural actors in their own right.

Regarding the question of labor practices, research on agricultural form and structure in South Asia has only recently turned towards the relevance of gender in agrarian labor transformation. Twentieth-century historians and social science researchers have steadfastly addressed the place of caste in South Asia's transforming farming communities, particularly in the context of patron-client relations throughout rural India (Athreya, Djurfeldt, and Lindberg 1990; Beidelman 1959; Berreman 1963; Beteille 1965, 1974; Bhaduri, Rahman, and Arn 1986; Bouton 1985; Brass 1990; Dumont 1970; Elder 1970; Epstein 1967; Gough 1989; Gould 1958, 1967; Harper 1959; Harriss 1992; Kolenda 1963; Lewis 1970; D. Miller 1975; Parry 1979; Pocock 1962; Seddon 1987; Raheja 1988; Ramachandran 1990; Rudra 1984; Srinivas 1976; Wiser 1936; for a discussion of the lack of studies specifically addressing Nepalese farmers, see L. Caplan 1991). However, inattention to gender-based differences in property and land ownership, labor forms and practices, and agrarian power is sufficient reason for reexamining some basic assumptions about models of South Asian agriculture (Harriss 1992). Thus, recent efforts to understand the gender dimensions of South Asia's agrarian political economy have focused, for example, on the local-level social and political contexts of women's wage negotiations (Kapadia 1993), gender-based differential strategies for coping with famine and poverty (Agarwal 1990; Kabeer 1993; Sen 1982), and differences in time allocated to various farming activities (Acharya and Bennett 1981).

However, where attention to gender emerges, caste seems to disappear, as if mere mention of gender (or caste) is sufficient to place a group economically, socially, and politically. This failure to link caste and gender, through either comparative or historical examination, resembles the problem in feminist cultural studies where class and race remain stubbornly disconnected in feminist theory.² Synchronic studies of lower-caste female workers do not address the historical relevance of a person's gender or caste (Kapadia 1993; Mencher 1988; Mencher and Saradmoni 1982). Consequently, gender and caste remain conceptually incoherent in our understanding of rural agrarian transformation in South Asia.

As this article demonstrates, contemporary forms of lower-caste women's labor in Nepal are a historical consequence of both their gender and their caste positions in society, in the context of changing landholding relations. This historical perspective on labor attempts to bring into fuller view what Harriss (1992:192) calls the hidden and "increasingly complex patterns of occupational multiplicity [found] in the category of 'agricultural laborer'" (see also Guyer 1991 for a historical account of gender divisions of labor in African farming).

Because gender and caste divisions of labor in rural Nepal have been historically linked with practices of social hierarchy and are currently shaped by local, national, and international forces of socioeconomic change, the low-caste female “agricultural laborer” of today did not always exclusively occupy this role. Her position in contemporary rural production relations emerges out of and increasingly departs from those social networks generated from the intercaste *jajmani* system (or *riti-bhagya*, as it is called in western Nepal). Thus, ongoing debates over the logic of the *jajmani* system in South Asia, such as intercaste relations of entitlement (Sen 1982) and enfranchisement (Appadurai 1984) and strategies for coping with agricultural and income troughs (Agarwal 1990), will remain unsettled until the roles of all people integrated into its system—women, men, low caste, high caste—are examined historically (Commander 1983). Furthermore, as this article will show, it is imprecise to regard low-caste economic roles, women’s included, as strictly products of a Hindu ideology that ascribes low-caste *dharma* to service-related labor for landowners. Too often the anthropological approach to caste and economic relations emphasizes such religious and ideological dimensions over material and economic ones. This article contributes to an expanded understanding of the caste society in western Nepal by focusing on the emergence of female laborers in the context of transformative capitalist forces.

In keeping with an ethos of social hierarchy inherent to the caste system, the people of Bhalara in western Nepal construe gender relations in several ways through codes of difference and asymmetry between female and male. First, by drawing from the same idiom of relative “purity” found in caste ranking and Hindu ideology in India (Dumont 1970), the people of Bhalara interpret the menstrual and childbirth “impurity” of women as making women less pure (and therefore more problematic) than men. Second, gender relations are construed through patrilineal interests. To protect patrilineal honor, women as in-marrying brides are construed as potentially threatening to patrilineal solidarity (Bennett 1983). In yet a third way, that of the idiom of “natural” disposition, the caste or “species” of female has certain attributes such as kindheartedness and compassion that, according to the sacred Sanskrit texts, make women fit for motherhood, yet untrustworthy in the “rational” and dispassionate pursuits of men (Allen 1982). Lastly, and the focus of this article, is the structure and practice of the gender division of labor within caste-organized peasant society, understood here as the allocation of persons to different forms of work based on their gender and their caste, and the cultural values and meanings placed on that work.

Because of their low status in two hierarchies—caste and gender—women of low caste might be expected to function as handmaidens to a community’s changing economic needs. This is, in fact, what the research has found. Over the past century, women of low caste have experienced significant changes in the kinds of work they perform, the groups for whom they work, and the types and quantities of remuneration they receive. The history of low-caste women’s labor has seen a gradual replacement of primarily artisan-related production with a variety of paid agricultural and nonagricultural work. The negative consequences of becoming free laborers in the increasingly capitalized agricultural economy include

the structural breakdown of secure, but exploitative, intercaste patron-client relationships and their replacement by informal and daily wage labor in the context of increasing poverty. On the positive side, the economic power gained through low-caste women's wage labor includes rental of *maatya* land given in exchange for loans made to upper-caste landowners, a practice examined later in the article.

Social Hierarchy and Low-Caste Women's Work

For the people of low caste, productive work includes agricultural production, artisan commodity production, and income service work, any of which may be done on one's own family farm and/or for landowning high-caste families.³ The examination here of untouchable women's work addresses not just the forms of labor but also the social relations of labor as we find them in Bhalara. Like productive work, reproductive work tends to interface with social hierarchies of gender and caste. Reproductive work has traditionally come to include activities directly related to biological reproduction (fertility, breastfeeding) and reproduction of household members and the workforce (child care, feeding, socialization) (Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Moore 1988; Pearson, Whitehead, and Young 1981). Reproduction as employed in this article includes its structural-Marxist sense, that of reproducing the social system (Stolcke 1981; Harris 1981), specifically, the hierarchical aspects of Bhalara's social system. This approach to examining gender and caste divisions of labor in Nepal recognizes their embedded nature within the social system, particularly its patterned inequality (di Leonardo 1991:31).

In Bhalara, hierarchies of gender and caste conduce to unequal social relations of agricultural production such that landless, low-caste, and primarily female laborers work for large landowning, upper-caste households. For low-caste women, the obligation to work in ritually "impure" activities such as those associated with the *riti-bhagya* system reinforces caste boundaries and leads to caste hierarchy.⁴ Thus, the ideological and material constraints around production processes mirror and reproduce Bhalara's gender and caste hierarchies. As a consequence, the public prestige value of women's work, particularly that of lower-caste women, is low (even though the work's instrumental value in the reproduction of the family is high). However, with their emergence out of strictly caste-defined work roles and the power they gain from certain income-generating labor, women of lower caste can shed these associations of impurity.

The Geographical and Cultural Setting

The research community of Bhalara is found in far western Nepal (Figure 1), and the people of Bhalara call themselves *gauko manchay*, "village hill people." Their clustered hamlets of stone, wood, and mud houses dot the sides of rolling and ever-rising hills that peak in the western Himalayan Mountains and flatten and descend to the Gangetic plain in the distant south. The vast snowcapped peaks are visible from only the highest vantage points in the surrounding area, but the mountains frame the identity of these people as hill peasants—small-

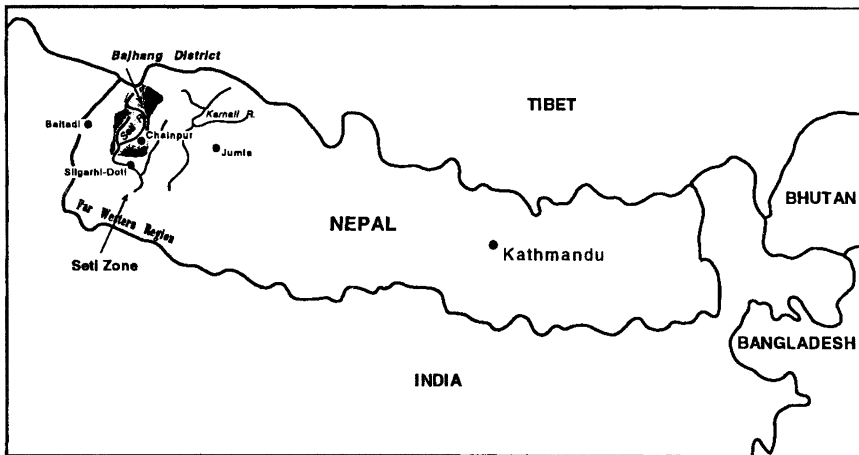


Figure 1. Map of Nepal

scale farmers who use no mechanized or capitalized means of production, have little capital for exchange purposes, and have a high population density to feed and house. What one is able to see from every place in Bhalara are steep and narrow terraced slopes, green with fertile crops of summer rice or winter wheat and brown in the late spring and fall between growing seasons.

Connecting the hamlets are a myriad of human and animal footpaths cutting across fields and up the sides of hills, guiding people to and from their fields, their neighbors' homes, and more distant sites. There are no roads in Bhalara, and there is no electricity or running water inside the homes. The people of Bhalara situate their community in relation to the rest of the world with geographical reference to Tibet and India.

Caste ranking in Bhalara is similar (though not identical) to that found in India and in the rest of Nepal and is based on relative ritual purity ascribed at birth.⁵ The lower-caste groups are linked through their ritual impurity relative to those above them. Although there are many arguments within caste theory about what makes the low castes "low," locally they are labelled *nachunay jaat*, "not touchable people"; *saano jaat*, "small caste"; or *talo jaat*, "low caste." In addition to their untouchable status in relation to those of high caste, the low-caste groups are ranked among themselves. The higher ranked and intermarrying groups among the lower castes include the following artisans and specialized laborers: basket weavers, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, masons, and former guards for the local king. These artisans, some of whom are also marginal farmers, do not touch persons of caste rank lower than themselves. The second tier of lower castes includes leather workers and tailors, who do not intermarry but are of equivalent status. At the bottom of the caste hierarchy is a single group of potters, musicians, and female prostitutes, who are untouchable to all groups above them. The highest ranked and most ritually pure caste in the Nepalese caste system is the Brahmins, followed by the Thakuri and Chetri castes.

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF LOW-CASTE WOMEN'S WORK

Conceptualizing Women's Work

Situating women's productive work in its historical context eliminates errors of presumed gender-based essentialism and biological reductionism that for a period stagnated the development of gender theory (Collier and Yanagisako 1987). When we ask about low-caste women's work in an agricultural setting, we confront two dialectically related historical transformations: changes in the forms and quantity of work that women perform and changes in the cultural definitions and meanings of that work. As the kinds of work that women perform change, the meanings associated with that work and, subsequently, the groups that have traditionally performed that work also change. Thus, economic transformation is at its core a social and cultural process.

Furthermore, transformations in the gender division of labor are linked to larger global processes. In a comparative study of the division of labor in four communities in Guatemala, Bossen (1984:2–12) demonstrates that the division of labor is not simply or only a local product but is a product of the dependent relationship society has to the world economy, particularly in the way it affects the economic division of labor and resources. The contemporary division of labor in Bhalara and the trend towards a "feminization" of agriculture—by the wives of the male landowners and their lower-caste female hired help—are influenced by the same combination of interrelated local, regional, and international forces that have impacted local landholding relations.

Intercaste Economic Relations and Untouchable Women's Work

According to elder informants, low-caste women in the past were more involved in caste-specific commodity and service production for a limited number of families than is the case now. The work of lower-caste women was narrowly determined by their family's position in the *riti-bhagya* system, a traditional intercaste patron-client system integrated into the agricultural economy of Bhalara, which binds low-caste families to high-caste families through economic need and Hindu religious ideology. In exchange for low-caste products and services, high-caste landowner patrons (called *riti*) provide harvest shares (called *khalo*) and are expected to meet many other subsistence needs of their low-caste landless dependents (called *bhagya*). *Khalo* payments from landholding *riti* families to low-caste *bhagya* families serve as the economic and moral backbone of the patron-client relationship because they establish the right of each family to ask for services, food, or cash advances from the other in times of need.⁶ Thus, the *riti-bhagya* system developed as a South Asian form of feudal economy in which landholding and labor relations followed caste lines. Its Indian equivalent is the familiar *jajmani* system (Beidelman 1959; Raheja 1988).

The *riti-bhagya* system was, and is today, fundamentally economically based and culturally prescribed.⁷ The largest landowner and the *riti* with the most *bhagya* was the family of the Bhalara raja; 63 percent of the low-caste families interviewed said that they had worked for the raja. Low-caste labor ties to

nonruling landholding families such as Brahmins and the indigenous Khas people (later integrated into the caste system as Chetri) evolved as rice cultivation developed, population increased, and agricultural production intensified. Upper-caste and landholding families who needed low-caste commodities, service, and labor developed economic relationships with those lower-caste families able to provide them. Low-caste families, in turn, relied increasingly on the *khalo* harvest shares from their patrons; upwards of 80 percent of the total food consumption for some families was comprised of *khalo* payments. The economic interdependency between low-caste and high-caste families eventually involved nearly all families in the Bhalara community.

In keeping with the patrilineal system of property inheritance, low-caste rights to *riti* and high-caste rights to *bhagya* are passed from father to son(s). Thus, caste-based economic interdependence developed in such a way that for the last few hundred years, the rights to *riti-bhagya* relations among the families of Bhalara have been inherited patrilineally. A woman's right to work for certain families is derived first from her father, then from her husband after marriage. High-caste families are committed to hiring low-caste people from their *bhagya* families for service work, commodity production, and agricultural labor. Female leather workers, tailors, potters, basket weavers, and goldsmiths who were skilled in commodity production worked with their husbands and other adult household members to fill the local demand for their products. Quantitative data on female artisan work are not available for earlier times, but during the contemporary period, women allocated only 9 percent of their time to artisan work, while they spent three times as much time in agricultural production. A very different situation was common in the period prior to the mid-twentieth century, however. During that time, low-caste families did not own land, and the economic strength of the traditional exchanges in the *riti-bhagya* system precluded the necessity for low-caste households to provision themselves in ways other than by artisan production. While some low-caste families did small amounts of sharecrop farming in the past, they were not extracting profits. A minority of low-caste women worked as agricultural laborers for others, but only in specific and seasonal work primarily for Brahmins and other high-caste women who were prohibited from such impure agricultural activities as hauling fertilizer and transplanting rice seedlings. In short, low-caste women rarely worked outside their patron circle, and such work was limited to work for the local rulers.

Further evidence suggests that low-caste women did not usually work for non-*riti* high-caste families on a regular basis and that their current work as daily wage and agricultural laborers is a recent phenomenon. The majority of low-caste groups migrated to the Bajhang region with high-caste Thakuri rulers from a region in Rajasthan, India (Subedi 1988), and low-caste men and women were obliged to work for them. Only later were *riti-bhagya* relations developed with nonruling families as landownership spread vertically to other castes and agricultural production intensified. *Asriti-bhagya* relations expanded beyond the primary ties with the king's family to include other landholders, women's work obligations expanded as well. By the time of the dissolution of

the local kingdom and the opening of Nepal's border to India in the late 1950s and early 1960s, low-caste women worked for their own families or for the local Bhalara king and his relatives. Importantly, though, they had also begun working for other high-caste families within expanding *riti-bhagya* relations.

Since the 1960s, low-caste women's work has increased in quantity and type. Bhalara women of both untouchable and high caste have experienced an increase in the forms and quantity of work they perform. As a consequence of competition from Indian and Nepalese mass-produced commodities, lower-caste women are shifting their productive activities from artisan work to agriculturally related work on their own small rented plots or on the land of patron landowners. What are the specific changes being experienced by Bhalara's low-caste women and the significant contemporary forces of change that have impacted their work? To answer these questions, we need to look at some of the general labor patterns and agricultural practices in Bhalara.

Agricultural Production in Bhalara

Agricultural production in Bhalara has developed into, and is now firmly established as, intensive irrigated rice cultivation, supplemented by wheat, corn, and millet crops.⁸ Today, most landowning Nepalese are subsistence farmers whose little surplus will be sold or given away. The most common agricultural sales transactions are between upper-caste and lower-caste people, the latter purchasing from the former. In fact, lower-caste people often refer to themselves as people "who must buy to eat."⁹ Livestock—cows and water buffalo—provide an important protein source in milk products, and they are the primary source of fertilizer (Bhalara farmers use only organic fertilizer on their fields). Goats are raised for meat and ritual sacrifice during festivals, and a few families own chickens.¹⁰

The terraced fields are prepared for planting twice a year. Stalks from the prior crop are burned, and manure-based fertilizer is hauled to the fields in deep bamboo baskets carried by women and is plowed under by men. During all phases of planting, outside help is often required. Labor contracts are preferably made between persons and families who have exchange relations circumscribed by the *riti-bhagya* system.

A cultural ideology that privileges farming as the occupation of most value has developed around the resource of land and the agrarian mode of production in Bhalara. Farming one's own land brings wealth, honor, and prestige to a family. Not all share equally in land ownership, though, since the systematic inheritance of land by males insures the structural exclusion of women from ownership of this most important village resource (Sharma 1980), inheritance through the patriline reproduces male control over the means of production (Coontz and Henderson 1986; Deere 1981; Acharya and Bennett 1981), and people of lower caste are structurally kept out of the land markets.

*Contemporary Gender and Caste Divisions of Labor*¹¹

Figure 2 provides a condensed representation of the time allocation data from Bhalara—the big picture of labor in far western Nepal. As we can see, all females

work more hours in productive and reproductive work than do their male counterparts.

Condensing the time allocation data in Figure 1 into ratios of leisure to work (with leisure defined in the research as “social” pursuits) yields the results in Table 1.¹²

Women of upper caste work the most hours in family farm production and reproductive and domestic work; they are the main farmers in Bhalara, a finding consistent with that of other researchers (Acharya and Bennett 1981). Nearly equal to the high-caste women in the relative allocation of time in work and in leisure are the women of lower caste. Both groups of women perform, on average, over two times more work in productive and domestic domains than their male counterparts. In fact, high-caste men were the only group to spend more time in leisure than in work activities. Indeed, women in the research population often postponed or interrupted interviews because of work or child care obligations, whereas men rarely did.

The relatively equal amounts of productive and reproductive/domestic work that women of all castes perform in relation to each other and in contrast to their male counterparts suggest that gender is a strong determinant of the

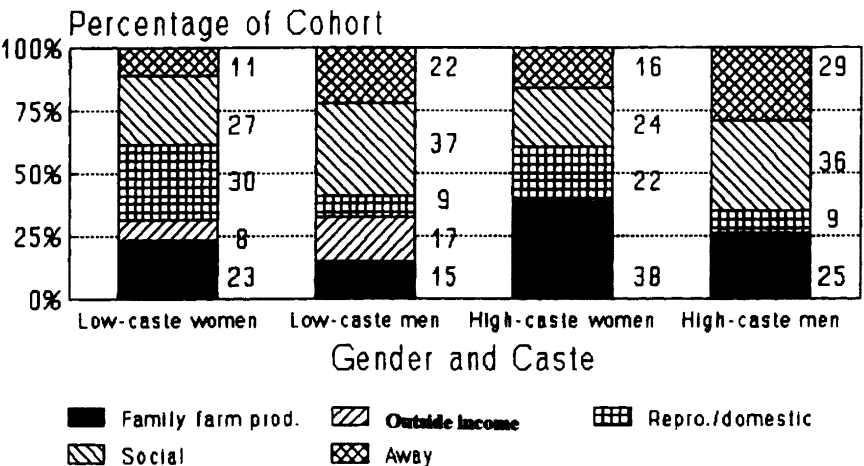


Figure 2. Gender and Caste Divisions of Labor: Comparison of Women's and Men's Work in All Households

Based on data from thirty low-caste households and twenty high-caste households, 1988–89.

TABLE 1
Ratios of Leisure to Work, by Gender and Caste

Low-caste Women	Low-caste Men	High-caste Women	High-caste Men
1:2.26	1:1.12	1:2.47	1:0.97

allocation of work in the rural Nepali household. To what extent does caste influence the allocation of work? When we look at the leisure-to-work ratio between the two major caste divisions, we find less influence than that of gender. First, women, regardless of caste, are more similar to one another in their work times than they are to men. Second, the men and women of low caste spend more time working than those of high caste, but only slightly more: low-caste people, as a group, spend 1.62 times more hours in work than in leisure activities, compared to 1.59 times more work hours for high-caste people. The near equivalence of these ratios is surprising in light of the fact that high-caste men allocate more time to leisure than to productive work. Clearly, the low productivity of men in high-caste households is compensated for by the work of high-caste women.

While these data might suggest little caste-based difference in the allocation of time for productive work, there are, in fact, significant differences in the *types* of work in which the villagers are engaged due to the fact that caste is a significant determinant of the social relations of work. This relationship is best demonstrated by examining the history of Bhalara's rural economy and the gender and caste divisions of labor within it.

FORCES OF ECONOMIC CHANGE, PAST AND PRESENT

The most significant causes of change in low-caste women's productive work are: decreased formal and informal ownership of land and increased rental of *maatya* land; male migration to India; competition between mass-produced and local low-caste commodities, with a subsequent decreased demand for low-caste artisan products; decreased supply of raw materials for low-caste artisans' production; relaxed social norms for female behavior; and an influx of outsiders—government bureaucrats, law enforcement officials, and administrators—into the area.

Land Ownership

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, the lower-caste families of Bhalara did not formally own land, nor did they need land to survive. Products made by low-caste artisans—leather shoes, clothing, pottery, gold and silver jewelry, bamboo baskets and mats, and iron farming tools—were in continuous demand by the local Thakuri rulers and other farming families. Artisans experienced little outside market competition because the trade of commodities they produced remained local, unlike the trade with India and China in salt and grains.¹³ In addition to their commodities, services rendered by lower castes as guards, tax collectors, and entertainers were important in maintaining Thakuri rule. For their services and products, lower-caste families received large *khalo* shares of the annual rice and wheat harvests.

Over the past five decades, the people of Nepal and their land have undergone significant changes. Dramatic population increase; land availability, distribution, and registration; and commodity competition have shifted the balance of the patron-client relationship in favor of the patron over the client, leaving lower-caste families disenfranchised and dependent on upper-caste landowners. The

most dire of these developments is land scarcity. From the advent of nationalist unification of Nepal in the mid-1950s to the present, the material base of traditional intercaste and land tenure relations has eroded due to a severe shortage in arable land. The main causes of land scarcity are: (1) the population of Nepal has more than doubled from eight to nearly twenty million people since unification; (2) intensive agricultural production, annual monsoon rains, and natural disasters such as earthquakes have caused steady and pernicious erosion of the Himalayan foothills;¹⁴ and (3) land reform has not successfully transferred land from those with plenty to those with none (Bienen et al. 1990; Eckholm 1976; Regmi 1978; Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron 1979).¹⁵ These contemporary changes occur at the end of a long history of upper-caste control over farmland through formal registration. Brahmin, Thakuri, and, later, other upper-caste families have amassed some of the largest land properties in the area through the legitimating practice of written land documentation. Land appropriation by upper-caste patrilineal disenfranchised low-caste families who did not press their own claims to informally held land, and the prohibition against female inheritance of land became inscribed into the quasi-legal code of the area. Women who had informally inherited land in the past became formally barred from doing so.

In Bhalara today, as in the past, land ownership closely parallels caste hierarchy. Of the fifty households in the research sample, upper-caste families own 82 percent of all land that is registered. The remaining 18 percent is owned by low-caste families. The average size of the high-caste family farm is 9.01 ropani (approximately 20 ropani = 1 hectare), more than 4.5 times larger than the average lower-caste family farm of 1.95 ropani. The main means whereby low-caste families meet subsistence deficits and shelter themselves against poverty and hunger is through land tenancy, the most common form called *maatyā* (discussed further below).

Male Migration

Male migration out of the middle hills to India and southern Nepal for employment is recognized as one of the most influential sociodemographic forces in Nepal's contemporary agrarian society (Thapa 1989). Thapa notes that probably all Nepalese rural families have experienced some form of male migration. Of the 168 males in the sample population, 24 (14 percent) had been away from the home for over six months of the year (7 percent of the entire sample population of males and females). Of these, 19 percent come from upper castes and 12 percent from lower castes.

In Bhalara, the influence of male migration is experienced daily in people's adjustments to the lack of local employment opportunities and an increasingly absent male work force. A woman from the Okheda caste of former palace guards told me that male migration was the primary cause of low-caste women doing more agricultural work now than in the past. She said that many changes began when men started going to India for work in the 1970s: "The women were left behind and they had to start doing the work in the fields that men had been doing before." The flexible domestic unit of production absorbed the labor gap left by

the absence of productive males. Low-caste women took over the *riti-bhagya* obligations of their absent husbands and sons; their men's work on high-caste family farms—including fuel and fodder collection, raising of livestock, and planting and harvesting of crops—was taken over by mothers, wives, and daughters, and low-caste women were hired as temporary agricultural laborers.

Competition with Mass-Produced Imports

Over the past two decades, low-caste families have been forced to depend less on harvest payments and other customary clothing and cash subsidies from high castes because the decreased demand for their goods has resulted in lower traditional payments. After the opening of Nepal's borders with India, low-caste commodities have had to compete with Indian mass-produced imports that have already replaced many locally made products. The group whose artisan production is most affected by Indian imports is the Sarki leather workers. The sturdy leather shoes and sandals made by Sarki are no longer in demand in Bhalara, having been replaced by rubber thongs from India and Nepal. Sarki products are considered unfashionable and low class in comparison to the shoes and sandals from India. People complain that Sarki leather sandals are useless in the monsoon season (though presumably they were functional in the past). The Damai tailors are also greatly affected by Indian mass production, their products being gradually replaced by "modern" goods. Thus, the Sarki's and Damai's place in the peasant economy as artisan producers is vulnerable to market forces. To keep their *riti-bhagya* ties, Damai and Sarki women and men must provide substitute labor, usually agricultural; otherwise, their patrons will cease to support them.

Decreased Supply of Raw Materials

Supplies of raw materials for low-caste production have been curtailed. Bamboo used in Parki basket making has traditionally been obtained from Khapted Lekh, a well-known plateau recently established as a national park. The park is heavily patrolled to keep local people from grazing their animals, planting hardy crops of potatoes and millet, collecting medicinal plants, and, for the Parki basket makers, cutting bamboo. Basket makers' access to critical resources thus has been severely curtailed, threatening their artisan livelihood and their ability to meet patrons' demands. Consequently, high-caste patrons claim that harvest shares to their low-caste *bhagya* are not justifiable. Like the Damai and Sarki, women of the basket-making caste substitute wage labor to large landowners for the loss of employment in their craft.

Relaxed Norms for Female Behavior

Bhalara and much of Nepal have experienced relaxed social norms for female behavior, paving the way for increased female labor of many kinds. Currently, women of all castes (with the exception of the Thakuri and Brahmin) do work which in the past was prohibited, resulting in an overall increase in women's work. The people of Bhalara give many examples of work that was exclusively done by men in the past but is now done by women. Local people once

considered this work to be impure work for high-caste women, too difficult for all women, or likely to take women away from the home and into “public” spaces of activity considered improper for women. Such work includes threshing cut rice and wheat, chopping wood with an ax, carrying rice and wheat in heavy sacks from the threshing floor to the home, hauling slate for roofing, lugging large bundles of firewood from the forests, digging fields and breaking clods of dirt in preparation for rice and wheat planting, and carrying manure fertilizer to the fields in baskets. I have observed women doing all of this work, as well as breaking large boulders and carrying the splintered rocks in baskets to construct walls, digging irrigation ditches, carrying timber from the higher hills, and hauling 30–40 kg of grains from the threshing floor—all work which only men did in the past. The only job currently monopolized by men is plowing; otherwise, men have not substituted other forms of farm labor, and many men admit that they are now “lazy.” Others defend their diminished work on the family farm by claiming that they travel on “big work,” referring to migration to India, and weekend trips to the district center (a day’s walking distance away) for political and government work or to settle various disputes.¹⁶

Women regard the changes in their work as a relaxation of restrictions placed on their freedom of travel. They claim that in the past they were not trusted to travel far from their husbands’ home, thus preventing them from cutting fuel and fodder in the secluded forest, grazing livestock in the upper hills, or traveling to distant fields to farm.¹⁷

Influx of Outsiders

The expanding national bureaucracy has penetrated into even the most remote areas of Nepal, including Bhalara in the far west, bringing with it an influx of outsiders, temporary residents. Local people are expected to meet the subsistence needs of these people (usually men), and farmers with agricultural surpluses find they can sell products at inflated prices. This practice disadvantages lower-caste people who have depended on low prices to offset their poor wages and depletes their traditional *khala* payments. Consequently, low-caste women have had to look for alternate sources of food supplies, as well as accepting cash over the preferred in-kind payments for labor.

Scarcity Arrangements: The Land Crisis in Nepal’s Foothills and the Importance of Maatya Land

Today, the low-caste families in Bhalara are in a constant daily struggle for survival. Their survival depends upon acquiring land to farm, a goal nearly impossible to achieve due to the local scarcity of land and due to practices in which low-caste households are regularly denied access to local land markets. During this research, large landowners of high caste revealed that their property was acquired in equal parts by purchases and inheritance. Surprisingly, high-caste families came to own their land just as often through purchasing it on the market as by inheriting it through the ancestral patriline. Furthermore, most purchases were made *by* high castes *from* high castes, a practice that privileges high-caste

buyers over low-caste ones. Even if a lower-caste family has the money to purchase, landowners prefer to sell to other upper-caste families for the political and social advantages such exchanges confer. As a result, the land market is effectively closed to families of lower caste, a point they frequently emphasize.

Maatya land is given to low-caste households as collateral on cash loans and may be used for the duration of the loans. In addition to providing the cash loan, low-caste families may also promise labor on the land. Figure 3 shows the distribution of land by caste among the fifty research families in Bhalara.¹⁸ As seen in Figure 3, *maatya* land is a critical addition to the farming resources of lower-caste families. By adding small amounts of this "rented" land to their minute parcels of owned land, the size of the average lower-caste farm nearly doubles from approximately 2 ropani to 4 ropani. On the right side of Figure 3, we see how critical rented land is to low-caste families. In almost all cases, rented land moved low-caste families into a higher landholding category such that low-caste people worked 32 percent of the total land farmed by the population, while 68 percent was farmed by high-caste families. Clearly, lower-caste subsistence critically depends on rented land. The money lent and the labor promised in exchange for *maatya* land is earned by women and men of low caste equally, as we will see in the discussion of labor exchanges and work for others below.

However, while *maatya* land tenancy arrangements give low-caste families temporary shelter against shortfalls, the low caste's economic dependency on high-caste households is reproduced. Eighty-seven percent of the low-caste families in the population rented *maatya* land from upper-caste families.¹⁹ Thus,

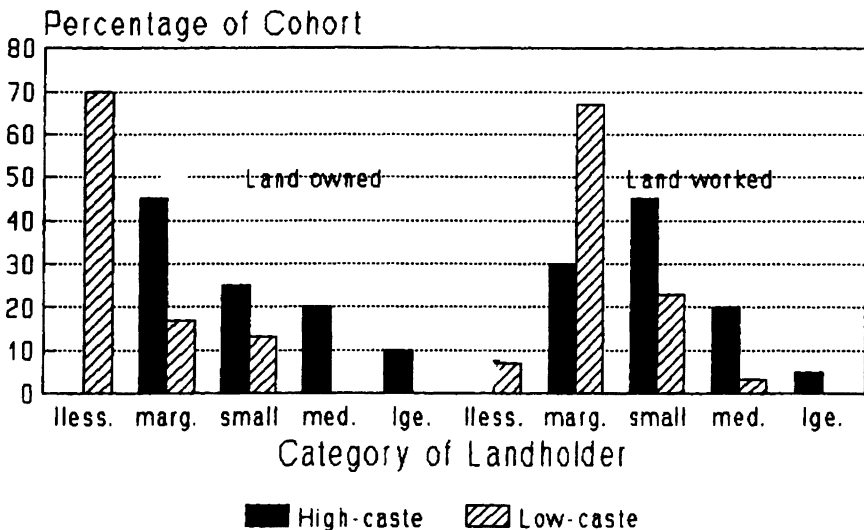


Figure 3. Land Owned Versus Land Worked

Land worked = land owned + rented land.

Landless = 0–1 ropani; marginal = 1–4 ropani; small = 4–10 ropani; medium = 10–20 ropani; large = 20+ ropani.

not only do landownership relations follow caste lines, but land tenancy relations do as well. Still, farming *maatya* land is preferred over farming no land at all because it gives lower castes partial economic independence from upper-caste families. Over the past twenty years, nearly twice as many low-caste families took more collateral land than took less, an indication of the demand for land locally. Because land purchasing is controlled by the upper-caste groups and lower castes find it extremely difficult to break into the tradition-bound land market, they settle for temporary use of *maatya* land.

CONTEMPORARY CASTE AND GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR: PUBLIC HIERARCHY, HOUSEHOLD COOPERATION

The history of gender and caste divisions of labor reveals that low-caste women's labor develops in conjunction with that of high-caste women's. In the past, caste-based differentiation of labor structured the local economy in ways that reproduced economic stratification and ideological hierarchy. Certain agricultural work was prohibited for high-caste women, such as carrying manure and digging the soil; low-caste *bhagya* were hired to do this farmwork. The question for us now is, Have these interfaces between economic and social practices shifted over the past century of change? If so, what impact has been made on contemporary gender and social relations?

With social and economic changes in Bhalara, high-caste women now do much work formerly prohibited to them, thus replacing their low-caste female and male laborers. At the same time, low-caste women resist doing demeaning agricultural work for others, occasionally generating conflict with high-caste people over labor and "impurity" issues. For low-caste women to do certain types of agricultural work that others have traditionally rejected subjects them to continued discrimination and reinforces their low ritual status. In one of the research villages, the people of upper caste considered stopping a practice of gift giving (usually in the form of money and food) to their lower-caste *bhagya* who were planning weddings. They were dissatisfied that the *bhagya* would not carry fertilizer for them any longer, that they had become too "proud" over impurity issues. The lower castes, on the other hand, see their resistance as power, using it as a reason for disallowing the marriage of one of their village daughters to a lower-caste family in another village who still carried fertilizer for their *riti*: "We are higher than them now [even though of the same ironsmith caste]. They continue to carry fertilizer, so how can we give one of our daughters to those people, who are lower than us?" In the end, the upper castes decided to reduce their gifts but not stop them completely. Thus, the lower castes resist certain labor that in the past was commonplace; locally, labor has become contestable.²⁰

Untouchable Women and Men in Household Provisioning: Complementarity and Flexibility of Labor

The rural economy of Bhalara involves differences between women and men of low caste in the allocation of time to productive activities, but the

complementarity of those differences contributes to sustained subsistence provisioning in the household. We see the complementarity of work arrangements most clearly in the two most important forms of labor, family farm production and outside-income work. Lower-caste women do more work on the “family farm” (albeit largely *maatya* land) than do their men—68 percent of women’s productive time to men’s 26 percent. Complementing this arrangement is low-caste men’s engagement in outside income-generating work—74 percent, compared to women’s 32 percent—due in large part to their *riti-bhagya*-related artisan production. Low-caste men are engaged nearly four times as often in *riti-bhagya* work than are low-caste women: 34 percent of men’s productive time was spent in work related to artisan production for *riti* patrons, compared to 9 percent of low-caste women’s productive time.

The important conclusions to be drawn from these data on the gender division of labor in low-caste households are: (1) *flexibility* in labor allocation is indicated by both sexes engaging in all three categories of productive activities (albeit at different rates) and (2) the flexibility of productive time and the fact that men’s work in outside-income and *riti-bhagya* activities equals the amount of time women spend in only family farm production lead to subsistence relations in lower-caste households that could best be characterized as *complementary* between women and men (see Borque and Warren 1981 for a similar characterization of rural Guatemalan farming households).

An enduring example of lower-caste women’s and men’s complementarity of work roles is found in *maatya* land-renting practices. *Maatya* land tenancy arrangements integrate the remote agrarian community of Bhalara in western Nepal into the vast industrial economy of India to the south. Since the opening of Nepal to India and the rest of the world, lower-caste men have been earning money in India and sending it back to their wives, who add their own earnings from agricultural and nonagricultural labor for others. The women then make loans to high-caste families in exchange for the use of land.²¹ Thus, women of low caste are critical partners in their husbands’ and sons’ *maatya* land negotiations, even though they themselves do not generally travel to India for employment. Additionally, women of low caste are important middlepeople in the *maatya* exchange arrangements: they artfully negotiate the land and its price, meet their absent husbands’ and sons’ work obligations, and fulfill new *maatya*-designated work obligations that both parties agree to.²²

The flexibility and complementarity of men’s and women’s work in low-caste households are apparent when we compare these features with their relative absence in upper-caste households. Greater differences are evident in some types of work than in others. For example, low-caste women spend more time in domestic work than do high-caste women due to the fact that, on average, low-caste households are larger by about one person; therefore, food preparation and serving, laundering, cleaning, and caretaking for the very young, the elderly, and the sick take more time. Second, due to the much larger landholdings of high-caste families, their women spend considerably more time farming the family’s property than do women from lower-caste families. Instead, low-caste women

seem to divide their farming skills between their own land and the land of others. Low-caste women spend almost as much time in family-farm *and* outside-income work (31.4 percent of their time) as do high-caste women in family-farm production alone (38.0 percent of their time). For many cultural reasons, high-caste women in Bhalara do not engage in work that produces income; on the contrary, they are in a position to hire labor. Finally, and interestingly, both groups of women spend nearly equal time in social and leisure activities.²³

One significant difference between the work of low-caste and high-caste women is that the former have multiple roles in artisan production, farming, and daily-wage labor, whereas the latter are farmers only, spending no time in outside income-earning activities. In upper-caste households we find less labor variety for both men and women than we find in lower-caste households, less participation of men in productive activities, and fewer labor choices available to upper-caste women. Thus, the labor dimensions of gender relations are mediated by caste in the households of Bhalara.

Untouchable Women as Hired Agricultural Laborers

According to the research, women of low caste spend 23 percent of their productive time in work for others for which they receive cash or in-kind payments. This is approximately half of the time that men of low caste devote to such activities (40 percent), yet is far more than that of women of high caste, who spend no time in outside income-earning activities. Untouchable women work in the fields belonging to two groups of high-caste landowners, *riti* and non-*riti*. If their relations with their husband's patrons are good, women prefer to work in patrons' fields because their labor time is an investment in the maintenance of *riti-bhagya* ties which they can draw on in the future. In turn, a high-caste family is likely to hire first from its *bhagya* families, due to their inherited patron-client relations and their greater dependability over workers from non-*bhagya* families. Women are usually paid in-kind from *riti*. If *riti* work is not available, low-caste women will work in the fields owned by non-*riti* landowners. For this work they are remunerated with both in-kind and cash payments. In the many work situations that a low-caste woman finds herself, all of the products of her work are pooled for her family's subsistence needs.

For what kinds of work are women of lower caste hired? The most important type of work is agricultural, steady, though seasonal. During the planting season, for example, a low-caste woman may remove rocks from her fields prior to planting, then help transplant her *riti*'s seedlings, only then to be asked the next day to gather firewood for a non-*riti* high-caste family whose own women may be too busy transplanting to collect firewood. Low-caste labor within agricultural production consists of informal daily-wage work in labor-intensive activities such as planting and harvesting and ongoing agricultural maintenance such as weeding and digging the soil. Data on the frequency of hires and types of payment were collected from forty-six families' hiring-in practices during rice planting (Table 2). Five types of work are considered: plowing fields (which also involves sowing of seeds), digging irrigation canals, carrying fertilizer, transplanting rice seed-

lings, and weeding and digging once the crops are growing. The number of households hiring ranged from three that hired males to help dig canals to forty-three that hired female workers to transplant rice seedlings.

The research found clear patterns in the gender and caste divisions of hiring labor; four main points can be drawn. First, the hiring of agricultural laborers parallels the gender division of labor on the family farm. For example, only men are hired to plow, sow seeds, and dig irrigation canals, and only women are hired to carry fertilizer, transplant rice seedlings, and weed the crops. Second, far more women are hired as agricultural workers than are men (98 percent and 2 percent, respectively, of all 722 hires). This pattern may be caused by the fact that women's jobs are repetitive—such as weeding and digging the soil—and many workers are hired during the intensive few days of fertilizing the fields and transplanting rice seedlings. Third, far more low-caste workers are hired than are high-caste workers (71 percent and 29 percent, respectively). And finally, on average, men's jobs are of longer duration than women's, due primarily to the fact that plowing takes nearly five days to complete, whereas the jobs for which most women are hired—transplanting seedlings and weeding—take half that time.

While men plow the fields in preparation for rice planting, women carry

TABLE 2
Features of Hired Agricultural Workers: Hiring Practices of
Forty-six Farming Families

	Plow Fields, Sow Seeds	Dig Canals	Carry Fertilizer	Transplant Seedlings	Weed, Dig
Number of households who hired	12	3	19	43	32
Average number of workers hired/household	1	1	6.7	9.7	5
Average number of days worked/worker	4.5	2.0	2.0	1.7	1.4
Males (total 15, 2%)	12 (100)	3 (100)	0	0	0
Females (total 707, 98%)	0	0	129 (100)	419 (100)	160 (100)
High caste (total 209, 29%)	1 (8)	1 (33)	40 (31)	135 (32)	32 (20)
Low caste (total 513, 71%)	11 (92)	2 (67)	89 (69)	283 (68)	128 (80)
Total rupees spent on labor (of 4,362 total)	300	0	500	2,904	658
Total kg of grain spent on labor (of 406.6 total)	46.2	0	29.9	155.1	175.4

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate percentage of cohort per job.

fertilizer to be plowed under. This is a labor-intensive job, and one considered impure. Hired women are always of lower caste. Over the course of two weeks, nineteen households hired, on average, just under seven women to carry fertilizer, for a total of 129 female hires (18 percent of the total hired labor force for the rice crop).

The largest number of workers were hired to transplant rice seedlings—418 women, or 58 percent of the total workers hired during the rice season of 1989. Transplanting requires many workers per household and is thus most affordable using reciprocal labor, or *parma* (discussed below). Nearly all of the farming households hired workers for transplanting rice (forty-three of forty-six), requiring on average an extra ten workers per household. Sixty-eight percent of the female workers hired to transplant were low caste; the remaining 32 percent, of high caste, were reciprocated with exchange labor.

After transplanting, the rice fields are weeded and dug, again using hired female labor. Weeding, a time-consuming job, is done throughout the growing season, and household women can, with the help of a few laborers, complete most of the weeding themselves. Digging the soil to aerate it both before and after transplanting, however, requires many workers. Thirty-two of the forty-six families surveyed hired, on average, five extra women to weed and dig the soil, a total of 160 (22 percent of hired laborers). Here again, most of the women hired to weed and dig were low caste—80 percent.

Untouchable Women's Earnings

How much do women of lower caste earn from their work in agricultural labor? Three types of labor contracts are used in Bhalara: (1) *nimak* is work compensated with in-kind payments and daily meals and snacks; (2) *jyala* is work compensated in cash and does not include meals or snacks; and (3) *parma* is exclusively female reciprocal labor and is most commonly used during rice transplanting and harvest when large numbers of workers are needed for intensive work. Prior to the start of work, either at the time of hire (commonly a day before work commences) or on the morning of the working day, workers negotiate cash (*jyala*) and grain payments (*nimak*) or *parma* reciprocal exchanges.

From Table 3, we see that the most common arrangement is *parma*, reciprocal labor done by women in transplanting seedlings, carrying fertilizer, and weeding. *Parma* was used in 75.4 percent of all cases in which work by females was done for others, and it was the arrangement for nearly 70 percent of all low-caste female hires.²⁴ The second most common form of labor contract was *nimak*, used in 21 percent of lower-caste female hires. The least common form of labor contract used in Bhalara is *jyala*, in which workers are paid in cash. In the cash-poor but labor-rich economy of Bhalara, it is not surprising that people make labor exchange and in-kind payment arrangements as often as possible. However, the channeling of grain surplus to temporary residents, mostly male bureaucrats, threatens to limit in-kind payments, and some lower-caste women are forced into accepting cash, which gives them less for their labor and requires them then to seek out those with surplus to sell.

TABLE 3
Type of Labor Contracts with Female Workers, by Caste

	Percentage <i>Parma</i> (reciprocal)	Percentage <i>Nimak</i> (in-kind)	Percentage <i>Jyala</i> (cash)
Low-caste women	49.4 : 69.6	15 : 21	7: 9.6
High-caste women	26 : 91	1.7 : 6	0.9 : 3

Note: In percentages: % of all female workers: % of female workers by caste. $N=707$

How significant to lower-caste family subsistence are women's cash and grain contributions earned from their labor for others? Because women of lower caste are hired more frequently than any other class of worker, they earn more than their male counterparts in agricultural labor. Nearly 90 percent of all cash and grain payments went to low-caste female agricultural workers during the period of research. However, gender mediates pay rates such that women earn less than men for equal labor time. This is particularly true for in-kind payment. Plowing, for example, is a higher paid job than is weeding. It also takes longer, so that a man hired to plow another's fields is guaranteed work for up to five days, whereas a woman hired to weed for a day must seek work again the following day, particularly during the off-season. A man hired to plow, dig irrigation canals, or sow seeds can expect to receive substantially higher in-kind payment than can a woman. Thus, the male worker earns more per job than a female worker. As a result, males' earning capacity is greater, in theory; should a male choose to do more agricultural work for others, he is in a position to earn more than his female counterpart. Female-dominated agricultural activities, such as planting and harvesting, earned women per diem rates less than half of what males earned for their daily wages. Women earned an average of 1.4 kg of grain per day, compared with men's average of 3.4 kg of grain per day. These rates indicate how often women of low caste must, and do, work as agricultural laborers in order to earn as much as their husbands, sons, fathers, brothers-in-law, or fathers-in-law would earn if so engaged. At the end of the day, women bring in more cash and grain incomes to the household, but they must work longer and harder to do so—in a variety of situations, with a variety of households, and with more daily uncertainty and competition.

Caste, interestingly, has no bearing on the rates of cash payment that workers receive, although, as indicated above, caste is reflected in the *type* of payment for which women agree to work. High-caste women are nearly always hired as *parma* exchange laborers, but low-caste women's labor contracts are more varied. Some lower castes do more *parma* labor than others, and some castes contribute far more workers to the labor force than others. See Cameron (1995) for further discussion of these patterns.

Untouchable Women's Work in Riti-Bhagya Artisan Production

The most well known economic relationship between lower-caste and upper-caste families is found within the *riti-bhagya* system. With the exception of four recently settled families, all low-caste families in the sample population have

semipermanent low-caste and high-caste *riti* for whom they produce goods and services in exchange for *khalo* harvest shares.

Women from *bhagya* families have two roles in fulfilling their economic responsibilities to their *riti*. First, women from families who regularly produce artisan commodities for the community (about 40 percent of the low-caste sample population) may fully or partially engage in artisan and service production. Second, low-caste women work as agricultural and nonagricultural laborers for their *riti*, as discussed above. Overall, low-caste women allocate 9 percent of their productive labor time to artisan production. Table 4 delineates the gender division of labor in artisan production. As we can see, women and men may either do identical types of work or may supplement each others' work. Damini (women from the Damai tailoring caste) are active seamstresses, receiving sewing machines as dowry or purchasing them. Luharni (women from the Luhar ironsmith caste) do not pound iron into tools as do their husbands, but they may pump the bellows or gather raw materials for farm tool production. Women in all artisan castes negotiate production timetables, deliver finished goods, make labor arrangements, manage orders, and collect payment for products from *riti* and non-*riti* alike. Many times throughout four years of residence in Bhalara, my high-caste hosts would request a good or service from *bhagya* women and, though the women do not always create the goods, they place the order and often deliver the product.

The lowest-caste groups considered the most impure have the highest frequency of female participation in artisan production. Baadini and Damini women spend more of their labor hours in production specific to their caste (pottery and entertaining, and sewing) than do the other low-caste groups—Parki, Okheda, and Sunar. The exception to this is the Sarki caste which no longer produces the leather goods which have lost in competition with mass-produced commodities from India.

Production of commodities is usually done at home where the tools are kept. The potters' wheels and molds, the ironsmiths' bellows, hammers, and hearths, the leather workers' tanning pits and chemicals, and the basket makers' knives and softening materials are not mobile, and therefore it is impractical for the work to be done at the patron's home. Some low-caste artisans, though, work at the patron's home for the duration of the production process. The Damai, for example, carry their sewing machines to the *riti*'s house to sew clothing, properly fitted, for family members. Goldsmiths also work at patrons' homes so that the patron can oversee the use of family gold. And the Oudh masons must, of course, work at the patron's home. An artisan working at a *riti*'s home will be given all meals that day in addition to the semiannual harvest shares.

CONCLUSIONS: CONTESTED HIERARCHIES AND FEMALE POWER

The historical trend in low-caste women's work is a movement away from artisan production and towards family farm production and paid agricultural labor for high-caste landowning families. Out of such practices that serve to

TABLE 4
Gender Division of Artisan Activities

Caste	Male	Female
<i>Baadi</i> potters, entertainers	Collect and mix clay, pound clay, shape vessel parts, dry, fire, decorate. Dance, sing, drum	Carry and mix clay, shape pipes, carry fodder, deliver goods. Dance, sing, solicit clients for prostitution
<i>Sarki</i> leather workers	Skin animal, tan hide, design and stitch goods, deliver	Collect raw materials, tan hides, design and stitch goods, deliver
<i>Sunar</i> goldsmiths and silversmiths	Collect materials; sell gold, silver; design, create jewelry; fire, hammer gold into sheets, silver into pellets; make wax mold; melt gold into mold, pound silver into shape; shine, decorate; deliver	Pump bellows, deliver
<i>Luhar</i> ironsmiths	Collect, recycle iron scraps; fire, pound iron into tools; deliver	Pump bellows, gather raw materials, deliver
<i>Parki</i> basket weavers	Collect bamboo, split into strips, design, weave, deliver	Collect bamboo, split into strips, design, weave, deliver
<i>Oudh</i> masons	Collect rocks, clay, manure, wood; break rocks, carve wood; measure, construct wall, house, steps	—
<i>Damai</i> tailors, seamstresses	Buy cloth and/or notions; sew men's, women's, children's clothing; deliver	Buy cloth and/or notions; sew men's, women's, children's clothing; deliver

reproduce the conditions of gender and caste subservience emerges a counterposition of power for women of low caste. But before discussing this important issue, let us turn to the main findings of the article.

Laboring Hierarchies

The division of labor in rural Hindu Nepal and the work of lower-caste women, in particular, are shaped by gender, caste, and landholding status. As people labor to reproduce their households, work becomes constituted by varying measures of these forces. For example, the primary productive roles of many Damai and Parki women and all Baadi women are caste-specific. They contribute to household subsistence their cash and grain earnings from sewing clothes, making baskets, and entertaining at weddings. Since their right to this labor derives from their caste position in the *riti-bhagya* system, these women's work is primarily caste-defined. This conclusion is further supported by two other facts: first, most artisan production, including the supplemental work of women,

is done for *riti* patrons, a relationship defined by caste; and second, the men of these castes also sew clothes, make baskets, and entertain at weddings alongside their wives and daughters, indicating a lack of distinction in work patterns based on gender.

Other forms of female labor, however, are subject to gender determinations, regardless of caste status. For example, certain agricultural work, such as plowing, is done only by men. Work monopolized by women, on the other hand, includes transplanting and weeding crops. Importantly, the impact of gender on agricultural labor significantly shapes labor contracts, including duration of employment and pay rates.

In addition to the gender- and caste-constituted forms of low-caste women's labor, much of their agriculturally related work derives from their landholding class. Working on their own small farms or in the fields of large landowners, in a variety of activities, low-caste women's agricultural work is more variable than artisan production, both in terms of labor relations and job type. This variation reflects the different social lives of women from lower-caste and upper-caste families, a separation caused primarily by their different positions in landholding and *riti-bhagya* relations. Laboring towards the same goal of household provisioning, each group of women reproduces its positions of asymmetry inherent in Nepal's caste and gender hierarchies in ways that may not be obvious from the cooperative experience of women working together. In working with and for the women married to the men who own the land, lower-caste women reproduce their own dependent position in the social relations of production, a position devoid of ownership and prestige. Upper-caste women stand in a position dominant to the women of lower caste whom they hire as agricultural workers, even though these production relations are contingent on a gender asymmetry in which women must work on male-owned property. Furthermore, the meaning of upper-caste women's work is to reproduce ideologies by which the upper castes maintain their privilege and status—the acknowledged subservience of females to males and the supremacy of upper-caste patriline. The social consequence distinguishing high-caste and low-caste women's work is that women of the upper castes enjoy the privilege and prestige conferred by their high status, whereas women of lower caste do not.

Lower-Caste Women's Work and Economic Power

The *riti-bhagya* relationship is vital for low castes because of the year-round subsistence it guarantees. Production and exchange entitlements that women of lower caste activate locally allow them to seek and be given daily work without recrimination. Even a reluctant upper-caste landowner can be goaded into providing some form of work on a temporary basis so that a woman can provision her family that day. These rights of low-caste women to labor in agricultural and nonagricultural production also encompass rights to produce commodities specific to their caste. Through traditional artisan labor and hired agricultural work, low-caste *bhagya* women are *critical players* in meeting their families' responsibilities of the relationship with their upper-caste landowning

riti. In doing so, low-caste women gain some measure of economic power.

A second source of women's economic power lies in their ability to acquire land for their families to farm. Women in lower-caste households contribute to the acquisition of both *maatya* and *haliya* (plow) land, unlike women in high-caste households. In all untouchable groups that seek land to own and that currently rent *maatya* land (this excludes only the Baadi), the value of women's work and their power within the household is high.

Maatya land is a form of loan collateral, and *haliya* land is lent to a family which provides the lender with a male plow. A portion of the money lent for *maatya* land collateral is earned by women of low caste working as daily-wage laborers, and the remainder comes from low-caste men's work in India. A low-caste man is able to migrate to India for employment only if household women (particularly wives) are willing and able to manage the family farm and meet *riti* obligations. Low-caste women must also cooperate in the acquisition of *haliya* land. While their husbands and sons are plowing another's fields, the women take on additional household and agricultural labor at their own homes and those of their *riti* (since more than plowing is always expected of the *haliya* family).

The relationship to land and its consequences for gender asymmetry are distinctly different for women of untouchable caste than for their upper-caste counterparts. The difference between upper-caste and lower-caste women's economic power lies *not* in the actual ownership of land (since neither does), but in *who* contributes to its permanent or temporary acquisition. *Maatya* is land obtained only after much work by low-caste women; its value for renters is high. Given that well over half of the land worked by low castes is not owned by them but is rented *maatya* or *haliya* land, the kinds of conflicts common to upper castes over inheritance and the partitioning of property do not exist in lower-caste families. But more importantly, the associated beliefs and ideas about the threat of upper-caste affinal women disrupting patrilineal cooperation and land inheritance (Bennett 1983) are only partially (if at all) shared by low-caste families. Thus, the value of untouchable women's labor and the lack of inheritable land among low-caste families occur at the expense of beliefs that would otherwise restrict women's independent economic activities and power.

The history of change in divisions of labor suggests cultural transformations in caste hierarchy as well. Links in the reproduction of a perfect caste hierarchy are weakening as the direct result of challenges presented by labor and land transformations. Forces that have shaped the history of gender and caste divisions of labor in rural Nepal are intensifying. The current work patterns of low-caste women reflect a contemporary arrangement of social relations of production distinctly different from those of the past when, as a group, they were involved primarily in artisan commodity production. The forced shift from caste-based commodity production to selling their labor developed out of the sociohistorical construction of low-caste landlessness and the current threat of decreased harvest shares from *riti*. With the rapid socioeconomic changes occurring in Bhalara, in particular the decline of arable land, the deterioration of

riti-bhagya intercaste relations, increased male migration to India, and decreased demand for low-caste commodities, low-caste women's labor will be increasingly freed into the rural labor market.

NOTES

1. Such groups include the Sherpa (Fisher 1979; Ortner 1978), Tamang (Fricke 1986; Holmberg 1989; March 1979), northern Tibetan (Levine 1988; Haimendorf 1966), Gurung (Macfarlane 1976; McHugh 1985), Magar (Fisher 1987; Hitchcock 1966; Molnar 1981), and Newar (Toffin 1977).

2. See the collection of articles in Nicholson 1990 that address the philosophical implications of this failure.

3. For high-caste Hindu female farmers, productive work involves primarily agricultural work directed toward the goal of household provisioning at a subsistence level; males may be employed professionally, though these jobs are few.

4. Age and marital status are also significantly related to women's work. For example, young unmarried girls generally do less and fewer kinds of work than do new brides, who themselves work longer and harder than senior affinal women.

5. There are two main differences between caste structure in Nepal and India: first, Nepal's Legal Code incorporates all Nepalese citizens into the caste system, Hindus and non-Hindus alike, whereas in India many non-Hindu ethnic groups remain outside the caste system; second, Nepalese ethnic groups, designated *asmatwali* ("liquor drinking") in the caste system, occupy the third level of the caste hierarchy and are considered pure or touchable. This same level in the Indian system is designated as the impure *vaisya* Sanskrit category, and these persons are Hindu. See Hofer (1979) for a detailed description of the Nepalese caste system's structure.

6. The bulk of *khalo* payments are in the form of unhusked wheat and rice but may include other foods such as millet, lentils, and soybeans. Although *khalo* is considered a payment for services rendered, the *bhagya* must still go to the threshing floor or the *riti*'s house to obtain it. This practice is called *maagnu*, or begging (see Cameron 1992 for a further discussion of *maagnu*). In addition to the *khalo* harvest shares, all of the commodity-producing castes charge a fee called *basho* for their labor and products at the time of delivery.

7. In contrast to the economic arrangement of the *riti-bhagya* system, slavery existed in Bhalara (as it did throughout Nepal) until the second half of the twentieth century. Low-caste people, because of their status as untouchable, were not slaves.

8. For extensive discussion of the early history of farming and cottage industries such as clothing manufacture in Bhalara, see Cameron (1995); see Regmi (1978) and Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron (1979) on other Nepalese sites. The two kinds of rice planted by Bhalara's farmers are irrigated and nonirrigated. Irrigated rice is preferred as a food, but it requires more labor to plant, maintain, and harvest. For further discussion about agricultural practices in the Himalayan foothills, see Cameron (1995) and Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron (1979). Supplemental grains and foods planted with summer/monsoon rice include alley crops such as lentils, soybeans, and mustard; during the same season, corn, millet, mustard, pumpkin, cucumbers, and other vegetables are grown in separate sections. Foods planted with winter wheat include lentils, peas, potatoes, cauliflower, spinach, and other vegetables.

9. Bhalara, like the rest of Bajhang, is rice deficient and is subsidized by the Nepal

Food Corporation, which has an office in the district center of Chainpur.

10. The importance of animals to the villagers is reflected in the large number of loans used for their purchase.

11. Several research methods were used to investigate labor in rural Nepal. Data on the allocation of time in various activities for all members above the age of five were collected in fifty low-caste and high-caste households for one year. Five categories of activities were used to codify the time allocation data (for a complete description of the seventy-one different kinds of activities recorded, see Cameron 1995): (1) Family farm production—planting, maintaining, and harvesting crops; fertilizing and irrigating soil; drying and storing crops; animal husbandry; collecting fodder and fuelwood. (2) Outside-income work—farm production done for others in which cash or in-kind payment is received; artisan commodity production; entertaining; portering; house building, maintenance, and repair. (3) Reproductive/domestic tasks—child care; food processing; cooking and serving; cleaning house and compound; fetching water; laundering. (4) Away activities—travel to India, the district center of Chainpur, or south to the Terai for business, employment, health care, and other reasons. (5) Social pursuits—personal hygiene; relaxation; religious worship; education.

The first two categories, “family farm production” and “outside-income work,” comprise productive work, while the third category of activities is understood to be reproductive work. Some “away” activities are part of productive work, for example when people of lower caste collect harvest shares from upper-caste patrons, and were therefore coded as outside-income work. Otherwise, the categories of away and social do not generally involve productive or reproductive work and are not considered here.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected on landholding patterns and processes, agricultural production, patron-client relations, gender and caste divisions of labor, and the work experiences of women of low caste.

12. The ratios were calculated by dividing the time spent in social and leisure activities by the amount of time allocated to family farm production, outside income-generating activities, and reproductive or domestic work together.

13. Salt and grain trade between Nepal, China, and India has a long history that continues to this day (Fisher 1987; Levine 1988; Regmi 1978; Seddon 1987; Subedi 1988). Tibetan traders come through Bhalara regularly, trading salt carried by sheep and goats for grains.

14. Of the fifty families in the research population, fifteen lower-caste families (52 percent of total low-caste families with owned or rented land) and thirteen high-caste families (62 percent of the total with land) claimed to have lost land in the past decade due to annual monsoon erosion and two destructive earthquakes.

15. For a complete discussion of the impact of national land reform and the distribution of the deceased Bhalara king's land on landholding relations in Bhalara, see Cameron 1995.

16. Professional positions such as government and teaching positions available to men or women have not increased substantially. The police, the largest group of professionals, are not local people.

17. Men say that they restricted women not because the *women* could not be trusted, but because other *men*, coming in contact with nonkin women in public places, could not be trusted.

18. Landholding data are grouped in five categories adapted from those used by the Nepal National Bank (Nepal 1978).

19. Of the 72 ropani of land rented by the sample population—the majority of which is irrigated land called *khet*—51 ropani (or 70 percent) is *maatya* land rented primarily by lower-caste families from landholding families. Untouchable families also rent small tracts of *haliya* or plow land. The remaining *maatya* land is rented by lower-caste people from other lower castes and poor upper-caste families renting from wealthy upper castes.

20. Low castes say that India's attempts at caste reform have motivated them politically. Nepal's lower castes return from employment experiences in India emboldened by their experiences there. However, caste reform is slow, changing primarily at the economic level from lower castes' efforts to acquire land and free themselves from dependent *riti* ties and less at the level of caste ideology.

21. Of the fifty households sampled, thirty-nine currently have at least one cash loan. Nearly half of the loans were used equally for livestock purchases and marriage expenses.

22. An established local calendar governs *maatya* practices. If a loan is not paid back by planting time for rice or wheat, the tenant can use the land again that season. By local consensus, land can be reclaimed for planting rice on the last day of Maagh (February 10). The renter harvests the wheat crop for her family, then relinquishes planting and harvesting rights to the owner of the land upon repayment of the loan. If the owner does not pay back the money owed, the renter can expect to continue planting for another season.

23. The importance of leisure time to socialize and talk with others cannot be overstated. The meaning of women's lives and their experiences of power are expressed in innumerable conversations with other women and men, as they build relationships with kin, neighbors, laborers, and employers.

24. In contrast, *parma* is absent in men's work arrangements. This does not mean that men do not exchange labor; they do, particularly in digging irrigation canals and sometimes in plowing. But men do not call their labor exchange *parma*; they simply say they are doing the work as a favor, with the unspoken assumption that the "favor" will be returned. Women, however, label their labor *parma* and therefore expect a labor return quite soon after.

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