

Education, gender, and generational change: The transformation of dowry in village Nepal

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Abstract

In a small Bahun village in Gorkha district, West Nepal, in only one generation, there has been a huge shift to educating young women and including them in modernity. Ideologies of 'gender equality' in education that are promoted in development programs and discourse, and in Maoist rhetoric, have been powerful drivers behind this. In this paper I highlight the gender and generational dynamics of the changing relationship of women to education in Nepal. I argue that the move to educating women is not a simple one, nor is it necessarily a development success story. The importance placed on educating the younger generation, including women, is also very much tied to local Bahun culture, marriage values and status. Bahun villagers of Ludigaun place great importance on both education and marriage. When combined, I argue, education has in fact become dowry. While there have been transformations in education and other modernising processes, as well as in dowry practices, in this paper I show that they have come to maintain traditional hierarchies and to support the status making of the educated Bahun man.

KEYWORDS

dowry, Education, gender, marriage, Nepal



1 | INTRODUCTION

'Modernity' through 'development' has been a mantra in Nepal since the 1950s (Carney and Rappleye, 2011, p. 1), with education perceived as the means to making a person developed (*bikas*) and bringing them 'into the modern age' (Skinner and Holland, 2009, p. 301). Education is crucial to contemporary Nepali identity, not only because it is a key discourse in development (Carney and Rappleye, 2011; Leve, 2007; Skinner and Holland, 2009) but also because it has been used as a vehicle to drive the nation-building project, with Hindu culture, history and language prioritised in the school curriculum to the exclusion of all others (Hangen and Lawoti, 2013; Onta, 1996; Skinner and Holland, 2009). The convergence of development and Hindu ideals means that while education in Nepal changes individual hopes and aspirations as well as social and subjective identities (Ahearn, 2001; Snellinger, 2016), the way it does so is often unintended (Carney and Rappleye, 2011). Despite some success, and claims of education developing people's critical discourse, making them aware of caste and gender inequalities (Gellner, 2007, p. 2; Skinner and Holland, 2009, pp. 296–297; Sharma, 2000, pp. 35–36), for most, education is unable 'to change their destinies' (Carney and Rappleye, 2011, p. 6). When it does so, educational prestige has resulted in greater social divides, inequality and disconnect; the traditional hierarchies of caste and class and rural (periphery)/urban (centre) remain (Carney and Rappleye, 2011; Snellinger, 2016). These tensions, I argue, are at the heart of everyday life in Ludigaun, a small Bahun (Brahmin, Hindu high-caste) village in the foothills of Gorkha district, West Nepal.

I spent one and a half years in Ludigaun, undertaking field work and living in the home of Ishwa, a retired school principal and village *thulo maanche* (important person), and his wife Prithvi. The everyday experience of Ishwa, Prithvi, their extended family, and members of the local community, frame my broader arguments around education, gender and development in Nepal. Given the dominance of the hill-Bahun in Nepal, the arguments discussed here should be seen to reflect Bahun wider society, however, the people of Ludigaun should in some ways also be seen as distinct from it. The Ludigaun population are well connected socially, geographically, and politically. For these reasons, they should be considered the high-caste Hindu elite,¹ where 'education' is both the driver and concern of an emerging middle-class.²

For the population of Ludigaun education is important both to their high-caste Hindu (Bahun) identity as well as to their 'modern', 'developed' subjectivities. It is a transformative process, in that gaining an education is perceived as the pathway to development, to becoming a 'modern' being, and to the realisation of 'an easy life'. Yet, it has been an (uneven) opportunity shaped by caste and gender. In general, the community of Ludigaun has been afforded the advantages offered by a modern education, including out-migration for education, precisely because they are Bahun and have benefited from access to education when others have been excluded, due to the long history of caste-based inequality in education in Nepal (Skinner and Holland, 2009). The upward mobility associated with gaining an education, however, has been a privilege afforded only to the men of the village. More recently though, there has been a convergence of ideologies of 'gender equality' in education, promoted in state-building projects, development programs and in Maoist rhetoric, with other processes at work in Ludigaun, *inter alia* globalisation, out-migration, and local Hindu culture. This has resulted in generational and gendered social change – in Ludigaun, in only one generation, there has been a huge shift to educating young women and including them in modernity.

In this paper I highlight the transformative nature of education in Ludigaun. My focus is on the caste, gender and generational dynamics of the changing relationship of women to education. I contend that the move to educating women is not a simple shift, nor necessarily a development success story. The importance placed on educating the younger generation, including women,



is also very much tied to local Bahun culture, marriage values and status. Bahun villagers of Ludigaun place great importance on both education and marriage, and when combined education is implicated in the transformation of dowry practices. Indeed, I argue in this paper that education has become dowry. Young Bahun women are getting an education not necessarily for the education itself, but in order to make a good marriage. This is partly because the younger generation of Bahun men in Ludigaun with aspirations of upward mobility must marry a wife who is their match in education, not in terms of the 'traditional' complements of marriage. So while transformations have taken place to include the younger generation of women in education and other modernising processes, and while marriage practices and dowry may have transformed, in this paper I show that they have come to maintain traditional hierarchies and to support the status making of the educated Bahun man.

2 | EDUCATION AND THE BAHUN TRADITION

Literacy and education have long been part of the male Bahun identity and knowledge a ritually important Brahmanical ideal. As the priestly caste, Bahuns are devoted to knowledge and teaching. It is the duty of Bahun men, as the custodians of the written tradition, to pass down the teachings of Hindu scriptures and texts (Gellner, 2007). Bahun ritual practice for men, therefore, very often involves a celebration of the link between men and a particular knowledge and, in terms of hierarchy, it places knowledge, the cultivated and literate above the non-literate masses (Gellner, 2007). Weber (1958, p. 148) states of the Brahmanical way of life, 'contemplative mysticism as a type of gnosis remains the crown ... the goal of every well-educated Brahman'. Of Asian religion and philosophy more broadly he adds, 'knowledge, be it literary knowledge or mystical gnosis, is ultimately the only absolute path to the highest spiritual good both here and in the world beyond' (Weber, 1958, p. 330). While Weber's assertions are based on his reading of Hindu texts, rather than the lived experience of Hinduism in particular places, and while he completely forgoes a gender analysis, the reifying of knowledge as he describes it is reflected in the older generation of Ludigaun men's practices, their striving for knowledge and in their discourses around education. These men believe that the progress they have gained through education (studying and working hard) is related to 'God [taking] care of us'. Education, in their optimistic view, leads to moral goodness. In contemporary Nepal this type of morality remains. Education is perceived to provide young people with the ability to 'delineate right from wrong, to be honest and responsible, and to identify the correct path in order to fulfil their duty' (Snellinger, 2016, p. 10).

The Hindu notions of *dharma* and *karma* are crucial for understanding this and for the broader Bahun emphasis on 'hard work' progressing to an 'easy life' that is so prevalent in Ludigaun. Simply defined, *dharma* is the cosmic morality between humans and other humans and the divine, 'a law, duty and truth (that) denotes the moral, cosmic and social order that humans are obliged to maintain' (Sanford, 2013, p. 81). *Dharma* defines 'the essence of the household and the fundamental mode of being in the everyday world' (Gray, 1995, p. 23). The law of *dharma* is closely linked to the law of *karma* or 'action and its repercussions' (Sanford, 2013, p. 84) – if a person performs their duties they will be rewarded, if their actions are evil, or if they become too attached to material things and their ego, then it is believed that they will suffer as a consequence (Bennett, 1983; Sanford, 2013). In light of the laws of *dharma* and *karma* Bahuns see themselves as mediators 'between the human and the divine world' (Barnard and Spencer, 2010, p. 343). Their goal is to achieve liberation/release (*moksa*) of the soul from the transmigration cycle of reincarnation/rebirth. In other words, the aim is to receive good *karma* based on one's performance of *dharma*.



3 | EDUCATION AND UPWARD MOBILITY

For the older generations (36–89 year-old men and women) who remain in Ludigaun, there is a gendered difference in the ontological reality of *dharma* and *karma*. For the men both educating oneself and educating others is a key performance of *dharma*. Inextricably linked to this is the making of good marriages for both oneself and others and for making *thulo maanche* (an important, renowned person; a person with social prestige) (Fuller, 2018). These village men have made sacrifices and performed their duty as Bahun men – as sons, husbands, brothers and fathers. For the majority, doing so has required them to be mobile and means that they have spent their everyday lives studying, teaching and carrying out community development and ‘service’ outside the village bounds (Fuller, 2018). Intertwined into their narratives of the hard work and sacrifices they have made to gain an education, both for themselves and others, including their children, is the realisation of *karma*. Ramesh (aged 40) states ‘Education is the third-eye ... It has become the determining factor in how a person’s life will turn out ... for what one will be in the future’.

For these men the perception is that education and duty have facilitated their upward mobility. They have made good marriages, for themselves and as a *lami* (marriage broker) for others. They have been provided opportunities for further education, gained employment and ultimately made their status as *thulo maanche* because of the sacrifices they have made for their families, the study they have undertaken and their performance of *dharma*. By ‘working hard’ (in every aspect of life – family, education, employment and community) these men have progressed and been rewarded with an ‘easy life’ and a certain type of personhood. For these men ‘hard work’ thus comprises study, teaching (or working in other professions) and duty. An ‘easy life’ comprises social prestige with the recognition of *thulo maanche* status. Ultimately, however, it is because of their position as Bahun men and because of the exclusion of others in the education tradition in Nepal that education has reinforced Bahun dominance and enabled these men to hold positions of power within the community – as leaders in local politics, as leaders in local schools and government departments. The same cannot be said for Bahun women, although they remain integral to status making for the Bahun man.

4 | WOMEN’S ‘HARD WORK’: FOOD PRODUCTION, SUFFERING AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The experience of ‘hard work’ and the practice of *dharma* for the older generations of women is vastly different from that of their male contemporaries. Because of a Bahun tradition that did not educate girls, the majority of these women are illiterate and their everyday lives are lived within the village and revolve around food production and food preparation for their families. Agriculture, including the keeping of livestock, constitutes ‘hard work’ for these women and because Ludigaun is a semi-subsistence household farming economy this work should be considered daily labour and not employment. It is work that fulfils a woman’s duty and ‘traditional’ roles in the household and Hindu moral order, within which a gendered division of labour is marked. In the Bahun moral order, women’s food preparation and provision is seen as integral to her duty in creating a happy marriage, husband and home life (Glucksmann, 2005, p. 32). It is for this reason, despite the difficulties they face that, like the Chorigoan women studied by Leve (2007), the women of Ludigaun rarely see their work as alienating. Indeed, in terms of social reproduction the opposite is true – they value their work and see it as a specialised type of knowledge and expertise; for the women of Ludigaun it would be alienating not to participate in work involving food production and provision because it is critical to their village identities as Bahun daughter-in-laws (*buhari*), wives (*shrimati/budi*) and mothers (*aama*), and



therefore crucial to the status making of their husbands and children. Women's work with buffalo is central to this. Buffalo are a source of milk, ghee, curd, drinking yoghurt and fertiliser, and therefore crucial to village social reproduction.

Nevertheless 'hard work' has kept women in positions of subservience – in many cases illiterate, uneducated and tied to place. One *aama* in her late fifties explained the limited position of the older generation of women in generational terms:

Farming is my work because we are not educated people. What else we can do? ... (T) here is no other way when one is not educated, what can one can do if one is not educated? ... I would love to do some easy, light work ... If I could read and write I would have become a *thulo maanche*.

My interaction with the younger generation of women in their forties, who still had limited chances for education, was similar. Khushala had just returned from collecting fodder and was tending to her five goats, buffalo and 5-month-old calf. '*Dherai garo kaam Sascha*' ('It's very hard work Sascha'), Khushala commented without being prompted. '*Bhaisiko kaam dherai dukha*' ('The buffalo work is really hard'). 'I didn't study so this is my work'. Asmita relayed similar sentiments:

I would prefer to be employed rather than farming because farming is very hard work. We have to work even in the rain, getting wet ourselves, we have to work even in the bright sun. If I could get a job ... I would do a job. I don't have a job that's why I am farming. It's hard work.

While on the one hand there is a commitment to an agricultural identity, in Ludigaun women also recognise a different kind of life from which they have been excluded. The women who remain in Ludigaun are constrained by their status as dutiful Bahun women – as wives and daughters-in-law with little education.

The notions of 'hard work' and suffering (*dukha*) have been noted elsewhere as integral to female subjectivities in Nepal (Bennett, 1983; Leve, 2007); March, 2002). Leve (2007) furthers arguments made by March – 'Painful struggle is seen as a normal, even normative, aspect of a woman's life; indeed, it is through certain types of suffering that the adult feminine subjectivity is produced' (Leve, 2007, p. 153). The *buhari* identity is the epitome of such suffering (Fuller, 2018). In the Bahun household, the *buhari* is the most subordinate member of the family (Sanford, 2013). Bennett (1983, p. 31) states, 'they labor the hardest and yet have the least say in how family resources are spent'. These days, for the older generation of women in Ludigaun, which still includes *buhari* subjects, suffering has been prolonged as a result of out-migration.

4.1 | Out-migration and its effects

Out-migration in Ludigaun was, until recently, also a gendered experience and is irrevocably tied to education. Previously, male villagers were able to be mobile and migrate, and to get an education, because of their position within the family and the Hindu moral order, while their wives remained in the village and kept village life going. But today mobility and migration are also generational experiences and it is the generational nature of the phenomenon that is having the greatest impact on village life (Fuller, 2018). The out-migration phenomenon in Nepal, more broadly, has resulted in changing economic, social and cultural values, including a conceptual shift in work and the making of new types of people (Campbell, 2010; Childs et al., 2014; Craig, 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Macfarlane, 2001;



McHugh, 2001; Pettigrew, 2000; Seddon, 2001; Snellinger, 2016). It has caused the older generation, particularly women, to continue to work long after they would have a generation ago because their children and grandchildren are now no longer there (Bhadra, 2007; Childs et al., 2014; Craig, 2011). The same can be said in Ludigaun, although the impetus and impacts on the household are distinctly Bahun.

Today in Ludigaun, young people are moving outside the village, to large urban centres or abroad, initially in search of education opportunities, not foreign labour opportunities as noted elsewhere in Nepal (Bhadra, 2007; Craig, 2011; Maharjan et al., 2012; Seddon et al., 1998; Sunam and McCarthy, 2016; Thieme and Wyss, 2005; Thieme, 2006). It is rare, once young people move away, that they move back, particularly when their migration is also representative of their transformation into a 'developed', 'modern' being (Liechty, 2003; Tamang, 2002); the move away from the village, and a life of 'hard work' (agricultural work) is a sign of progress and a step towards creating an 'easy life'. With a very distinct absent demographic of 16–36 year-old men and women, the 'core village' (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 184) comprises an ageing population with an average of only three people living in each household.³ With their sons living outside the village for education and later employment, and with their wives going with them for the same reasons, there are no younger generation of *buhari* living in Ludigaun. This is not the case elsewhere in Nepal, including in neighbouring Magar Gau, where women are leaving home for marriage and not educational opportunities, and where the wives of the migrated men of the village remain in the man's village and keep village life going. The particular nature of out-migration in Ludigaun means the older generation of women must not only continue to work hard for longer, but remain with their *buhari* status for longer, rarely getting to practise their role as mothers-in-law (*sasoo*). This is the experience of Prithvi, Ishwa's wife, who at age 60 remains a *buhari*, with no children or daughter-in-law of her own in the village to provide her upward mobility.

As a result of out-migration the hard work of the older generation of women is devalued on three levels. Firstly, it is not recognised because it is embedded as Bahun duty (Glucksmann, 2005). Secondly, in Nepal, as men have increasingly become more mobile and/or have migrated, women have moved into the agricultural domain, which has seen a cultural devaluing of agricultural work generally (Cameron, 1998; Levine, 1988; Panter-Brick, 1989). Thirdly, there exists a global neoliberal development discourse devaluing agriculture and subsistent livelihood practices (Campbell, 2005; 2013; Li, 2009; Shrestha, 2008). In terms of the impact on women's personhood, it means the older generation of women in Ludigaun are devalued both as the inferior *buhari*, and as the non-modern subject.

4.2 | Social reproduction

While their work is systematically devalued by a Hindu patriarchal tradition and by a discourse of devaluing in development, the work of the older generation of women should still be considered an investment in persons. Indeed, the older generation of women are at the heart of all levels of social reproduction in Ludigaun: they bear and raise children, they feed people (and animals), they work (hard), and through their work they are key to reproducing social and moral identities that are the foundation of the contemporary gendered politics of modernity in their village. In contemporary Ludigaun it is precisely this work that has allowed their husbands and children the opportunity to be able to be mobile, to migrate and to become educated, thereby fostering men's and the younger generation's upward mobility. Yet it is an investment that is not being made *in this way* by the next generations in Ludigaun and one that is not necessarily made in other communities.



5 | GENERATIONAL CHANGE: EDUCATING GIRLS

In Ludigaun, in only a single generation, there has been a huge increase in people getting an education, and for many a higher education, in line with trends in wider Nepal (Kölbel, 2013). The dramatic shift has villagers referring to the first decades of the twenty-first century as 'the education era', and commenting, 'now is the time of education'. As a point of differentiation between other communities, the focus on the particular type of education – English language and private schooling – that many villagers are seeking for their children, should be seen as a form of cultural capital, as speaking English now makes up part of what it means to be 'modern' in Nepal (Gellner, 2007; Pigg, 1996). In Ludigaun, therefore, education is both a class concern and a caste concern. I have shown that in Ludigaun, up until recently, education has stood for a gendered position (male) that has been important for how the men of Ludigaun have been positioned as Bahun and politically authoritative in wider society. Education is, therefore, part of the Bahun tradition while, paradoxically, in this new era of education and through the discourses of 'modernity' and 'development' it promotes, many Bahun traditions are being abandoned and/or transformed. This is a legacy of the modernisation theory of development, which views cultural traditions and collective achievement as backward and proposes that development will occur through investments in education that actively seek to challenge the traditional and collective way people view the world and promotes modern and individualistic alternatives (Liechty, 2003; Rostow, 1960). For the villagers of Ludigaun, education is a 'modern' discourse that promotes making a change to traditional values and practices including to the tradition of not educating girls.

Gender equality is a dominant discourse of modernity and development and the most obvious example of this at work is the change taking place in the gendered experience of education. The Bahun population has abandoned its tradition of educating only boys, so that the younger generations of women in Ludigaun are now getting an education. Banita (aged 36) outlined the reasons she studied.

Because slowly people started being aware and the awareness increased. The mentality of people towards educating their daughters slowly developed. In the place where I was born there were many girls, my four older sisters did not get an education and then I got an education, and then after I got educated, my smaller sisters also got an education. At that time there was a mission in that region named 'Mission Welfare' ... They said the girls must study, they must get an education – if they are educated the family becomes educated and then their children will also be able to get better educated ... They called all the parents from that place and showed them films ... on the topic of educating girls. And then the parents in that region ... they enrolled their daughters to educate them. 'The Mission' distributed books and uniforms for free. Two sets of uniforms, books, notepads and pencils were given for free for one year ... and so many girls from that region could get an education. From that time we started studying and slowly I got educated and then my father and mother also thought, 'we will educate them so they will be able to get good jobs and so they will not have to work hard, rear buffalo, cut grass, clean the dung like us'. And so I studied. I read many books. We knew that we had to study and we did and now we are employed ... If I were not educated, I would be cutting grass, carrying wood, rearing buffalo, rearing cattle. Now I go to work so I do not have time for rearing buffalo. In my work I get to meet many people, many renowned people and I talk about the things from here and there.

Banita's account demonstrates the direct link between development programs and the move to educating girls in Nepal. It further highlights education as a route to her (a woman's) upward mobility. Through



education Banita has become more than local – she is worldly – she can speak of things from ‘here and there’, and importantly, if she were not educated Banita would be doing agricultural work and keeping buffalo.

Nepal’s revolutionary Maoist (*Maobaadi*) party aims correspond with the development aims around education and caste, ethnic and gender equality in Nepal (Snellinger, 2016). This is important in Ludigaun because Gorkha was a Maoist stronghold in Nepal’s decade-long civil war and many of the villagers remain *Maobaadi* supporters (Fuller, 2018). The Maoist’s fought against ‘inequalities of Nepali society’ (Gellner, 2007, 6); they exploited issues of ethnicity (Gellner, 2007) and gender, and their uprising against the government was seen as a class-based struggle. Today, Maoist rhetoric emphasises education and development for all, and through this speaks of ‘A New Nepal’ (*Naya Nepal*). Villagers in Ludigaun support the Maoists because of these commitments. Lamichhane Aama told me, ‘Before I was a Congress supporter and now I’m a Maoist ... Why did I change parties? Because they brought a New Nepal!’ The Maoist focus on gender equality was part of her consideration:

Thuli Aama: They (Maoists) show respect. The girls also join them. They say girls are also equal and the girls work together with them ...

Vana: When they (Maoist men) come to eat in our houses they clean the dishes, they don’t leave it for us. They clean it themselves (laughs).

These perspectives highlight March’s (1983, p. 743) logic of gender as a symbolic system –

to represent things that are, and are not, the same; things that might be the same if they were not interpreted from opposing perspectives; perspectives that emerge as opposed because they arise as women and men consider the gender logic of each other’s position; men and women who, as they consider one another, confront the many ways in which they are, and are not, the same.

In Ludigaun today, we see the situational and emergent nature of gender dynamics in which opposing gender perspectives are brought into relationship precisely because there is a new conjunction of perspectives and interests in a new situation and the outcome is not necessarily predictable. The discourses of economic development and equality that drive education, including educating girls, is a new class ideal. However, because of the importance placed on education and knowledge in Bahun society, I will argue that having highly educated girls has now also become a caste ideal. Education is now strongly tied to traditional marriage values. The status difference between men and women that is based on education has been lost. However, while an education means a wife will no longer go to the fields, she will still be required to contribute to the family through the money she earns in paid employment. Decisions around education in Ludigaun, therefore, also contain important considerations around marriage. In terms of a cost-benefit analysis, Stash and Hannum (2009) point out that investments in education are not only worth more in terms of employment but also have great worth in terms of marriage. While villagers in Ludigaun are now investing in their sons’ and daughters’ education alike, in many ways, educating their daughters takes place not for education itself but precisely because it will increase their status and thereby, their chances of a good marriage. Kancha Ba, an older retired school principal, explains this shift:

Before, girls, daughters, were said to be the people who were given away to others, so why should they get education? If they were married on time their husbands will take care of them, so people used to say that it wasn’t necessary to educate them. In our time,



in the early days, we didn't get the chance to teach girls ... because there was no tradition to educate girls. People used to think if girls were sent to school, they would talk to everyone, they would run away with a man. It used to be like that. Now people have come to know these things. Now, people like us think that girls should get an education, even more than boys. However, while our sons stay in our control, our daughters are still given to others. What can we do? If she is not educated, she is humiliated, she will cry. We have to give her a good education ... So now there is almost no one who doesn't educate their daughters.

Kancha Ba makes clear here that young girls in the community are in part getting a good education in order not to shame them. However, what he does not mention is the importance the Ludigaun population places on getting a wife for their sons who is of an equal educational status. Having had only sons, Ishwa, the village *thulo maanche*, spoke to me about his early efforts to arrange a marriage for his youngest son: 'his wife, because he is an engineer and this is a job with a good status in Nepal, should also be well educated'. In Kancha Ba and Ishwa's accounts we see two different forms of rhetoric – from a father of a bride and a father of a groom. The shame of the bride of whom Kancha Ba speaks is ultimately the shame of the family. Today in Ludigaun a young woman knows that to provide for her natal family (to avoid their shaming) means being educated.

6 | EMBEDDED AND DISEMBEDDED: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND GENDER RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEMPORARY LUDIGAUN

Before going on to describe further the exact nature of the shift taking place in education in Ludigaun, it is important to contextualise this shift as a process that has moved from one embedded in local relationships to one that is at once, and murkily, both embedded and disembedded from them. March's (1983) analysis of the 'gender symbols' of weaving and writing among the Tamang of Nepal is valuable for thinking about how the older generation of men of Ludigaun are positioned in relation to the older generation of women in the village due to their education and literacy, and also for how they are positioned as Bahun (and politically authoritative) for the same reasons in wider society. March (1983, p. 730) argues that gender is a symbolic system, 'a system of beliefs about the world' and weaving and writing amongst the Tamang are symbols that at once highlight a gendered division of labour and gendered subjectivities, as well as political authority. Weaving skirts is uniquely Tamang and thus positions the Tamang as ethnically distinct within wider society; it also positions women with regard to men amongst the Tamang. In addition, it goes further in positioning women amongst themselves, as people are known to be either skilled or unskilled in weaving. Similarly writing (the Buddhist texts of the Tamang in Tibetan) symbolises the Tamang's 'ethnic distinctiveness and Buddhist solidarity' (p. 734) in what is officially a Hindu state dominated by Hindu ideology. Tamang men who identify as *Lama* are 'identifying themselves with their texts and (as) textual specialist' (p. 734). March argues that, in this way, Tamang liken themselves to Hindus (their *lamas* akin to Brahmins). Text therefore positions Nepal's Tamang inter-ethnically, as a man's skill singles him out 'for special prestige' (March, 1983, p. 734). For March, the Tamang world order then demonstrates gender as 'the paradox of conflicting views and mutual regards' (March, 1983, p. 736).

The similarity between the Tamang and Bahun situation in Ludigaun is that education and literacy stand for a gender position (male) within a very specific cosmological dynamic and Tamang skirts and Bahun buffalo both stand for the (female) fabric of local society; thus, for the older generation



education and buffalo are opposing perspectives from which they experience and interpret their everyday lives. These gendered symbols make distinct the gendered division of labour and associated mobility and expectations of what it is to be a man and a woman in Ludigaun. As educated, literate and mobile priests and teachers, Bahun men are the keepers and purveyors of knowledge, whereas the older generation of women, who have been denied an education, are confined to place and their duty as Bahun daughter-in-laws, wives and mothers, of which their work with buffalo is symbolic. As with skirts, buffalo also stand for the differentiation of women. The older generation of women of Ludigaun are competitive in the care they give to their buffalo and thus buffalo make distinct the most dutiful Bahun women. Buffalo also distinguish between generations of women, with the younger generation of women having no buffalo at all. In this way education and buffalo give us a vision of the paradoxical gender dynamics of difference and identity to which March refers. In Bahun Ludigaun these gender dynamics are much more hierarchical; a man's education and literacy is positioned far above a woman's work with buffalo in the household. This is also how Bahun men have positioned themselves inter-ethnically – at the top of a caste and ethnic group hierarchy where they are politically and economically dominant for the same reasons. However, what I describe in this paper as the shift in education represents major shifts in all of this, precisely because education is the point where identity construction intersects with a wider national inter-cultural space. This intersection has intensified in recent years. 'Modern' western education is a continuity in the sense that it is a space of male and caste privilege that is grounded both in internal control of resources and external control of relations within the broader nation and community. However, education in Ludigaun today is also different in two ways. Firstly, education as a national development project is juxtaposed with 'tradition' and the cosmologically specific claims of Hindu and Buddhist knowledge. As such, it is a space in which all Nepali men can now meet in competition – they do not simply play out their similarities. As a result of contemporary opportunities of both education and out-migration for many Nepalis, Ludigaun villagers perceive Bahun to be wavering. This leads to the second point. Education in Ludigaun is now also a space in which Bahun men and women meet precisely in order for men to carry through the nationalist and competitive aspects of their new education, and ultimately so Bahun dominance may continue. Therefore, education is gendered, but it is also the ground on which the dialectics of gendered difference are worked out due to the Bahun necessity of educating women to maintain their caste position within the nation. In this process the specificity of the buffalo or the 'fabric' of Bahun society is in danger of getting lost as caste and education become disembedded.

Biao's (2005; 2007) theory of gender and the system of migration among Indian IT professionals is useful for explaining this shift for two reasons. Firstly, unlike other key theorists of migration (Massey et al., 2010), Biao focuses his attention not on the embeddedness of migration, but on its disembeddedness (capital abstractions). For Biao, embeddedness involves a focus on 'how economic activities, no matter how abstract and global, still depend on and are still shaped by concrete human connections' (Biao, 2007, p. 3), whereas disembeddedness focuses on the question of, 'how people develop social relations—seen as a holistic process of which their economic activities are a part—that lead to economic globalization' (Biao, 2007, p. 3). In Bahun Ludigaun I argue that education and out-migration also involve a process of disembedding. On the one hand, young people are making marriages (husbands and wives) on the basis of education and opportunities for out-migration and future employment. This younger educated, migrated generation represents the future of the village only in terms of the remittances they will send back to the village. This process is still based on familial and caste relations, however, at the same time these relationships are no longer being reproduced in the same ways precisely because they are no longer bound in the local ecology of place. As a result of their out-migration, and other global processes of abstraction, the village economy is also no longer so firmly and extensively embedded in familial, caste and community relations and so the future of the



village economy is as uncertain and volatile as the global economy for Ludigaun villagers and their emigrated children.

The second reason Biao's approach is so pertinent to my own is that with regard to gender and migration, rather than focus on difference – the experience of male migrants on the one hand, and on those left behind (the female experience) on the other, as is the case in much of the previous literature. Biao's approach is to demonstrate how gender relations create and sustain the migration system and its processes. Gender he argues, 'is a central organizing principle of social life' and gender relations (the relationship between husbands and wives through the institutions of marriage, dowry and family) are 'central in producing a migration system itself' (Biao, 2005, p. 357). It is the 'new dynamisms of the global economy rather than geographic mobility per se' (Biao, 2005, p. 359) and the way these intersect with gender relations with which Biao is concerned. While the flexibility and mobility required in the IT industry provide constraints on women taking on IT careers, it is women's work – either at home, or in stable employment – that allows her husband to be flexible and mobile, making the system 'sustainable in a highly volatile market' (Biao, 2007, p. 375). In contemporary Ludigaun today, a woman's position, through marriage, remains integral to her husband's status.

7 | MAKING MEN AND *THULO MAANCHE*: MARRIAGE CONSIDERATIONS IN EDUCATING GIRLS IN LUDIGAUN

During the period of my fieldwork it became clear to me, in part due to the amount of interrogation into my own marital status, that, for a Bahun woman, marriage is the most important rite of passage – it transforms a daughter into a daughter-in-law, a girl into a woman. Today in Ludigaun it is much better for a young woman in her late teens and early twenties to be married than unmarried as the status and upward mobility that marriage can bring are the positive implications of marriage for Bahun women. However, there are also a series of negative implications of the transformation of girls upon marriage. In Bahun culture a filiafocal (daughter-worshipping) ideology exists (Bennett, 1983). This means, 'women are sacred and worshipped until their marriage and dangerous, polluting and inferior once they become sexually active' (Gellner, 1991, p. 115). Exogamous marriage rules mean a young woman must move from her natal home to her marital home where she then must perform the tasks and obligations associated with being a wife, but also with being a *buhari*, unless of course, she is living abroad or in an urban area with her out-migrated husband. In this section, however, my focus is not on the marriages, migration strategies or identity transformation for women in Ludigaun, rather, I will focus on how marriage, in particular, marriage to an educated woman, is important to making male identities.

Gray (1991) highlights the centrality of marriage to the performance of male *dharma* in the Bahun tradition. The Bahun head of the household or family (*pariwar*), 'the Householder', has three principle duties (Gray, 1991, p. 56): 'begetting offspring; feeding the ascetics, and performing sacrifice'. Women are integral to these duties and thus marriage is implicated in the *dharma* of the Householder as the social relationship or obligation that must be performed for Householders to carry out their duty. Gray states, 'men are associated with the goal of moral action in the world – to sustain the cosmos; women are the means' (1991, pp. 56–57). The gift of a daughter for marriage is the provision of this means:

The daughters borne of the marital relation are given away to other men of other households. One household, therefore, provides the means, in the person of his daughter, for another to fulfill his dharma. (Gray, 1991, p. 57)



In the Bahun tradition, therefore, it is not maleness or femaleness *per se* that determines a woman's subordination to her husband, a husband's superiority over his wife, but rather, the association of the husband with the realisation of this *dharma*. I argue that in contemporary Ludigaun, despite processes of disembedding, this is still largely the case today.

There are two paradoxical ways in which marriage, tied to men's work and duty, makes men in Ludigaun. The first is by investing in their children's (sons' and daughters') education. Investment in a young person's education is, in fact, also an investment in their marriage. Ishwa speaks of the investments he made in his sisters' education and, thereby, their marriages:

In the village my brothers, sisters, not now but from about 15–20 years before, the status of our family is higher. We are more advanced than others. We think so ... Because at that time the others (villagers), they did not want to sacrifice the family money on education. For example, [the neighbour's] family is richer than our family, about ten times richer than us. But his father was such a miser that he did not give his daughters a chance to study nicely so his daughters have a low status now ... His father did not like to spend the money for making their status. But ... in education, or if we want to get a good boy for my daughter (a good marriage), I have to sacrifice something important. Maybe it involves the sacrifice of money or maybe the sacrifice of (a large wedding feast) ... I do this ... so the status becomes higher and higher ... I am so proud that I helped make my brothers' future, that I have made my sisters' future ... I have supported them so much in their education ... They are in advanced families because I have spent lot of money on them ... I am happy that they all are good economically, socially, academically, they all are good because of my contribution.

Ishwa's sisters were able to marry well because, among other things, they had been educated. Their subsequent marriages to wealthy, educated men, men in 'upper positions' lifted Ishwa's family's status as well as his own. It also further reinforced the status of the men Ishwa's sisters married.

The second concerns the task of arranging marriage. Despite transformations in education and relationships, arranged marriage is still the norm in Ludigaun, although there has been a slight shift towards the practice of love marriage as is the case elsewhere in Nepal (Ahearn, 2001). Marriages are arranged by a *lami* (marriage broker), usually a third-party male relative who has a wide social network and influence. The role of the *lami* is not a role for women and it is work the Bahun men of Ludigaun take very seriously; it is a role that contributes to their *thulo maanche* status through the use and (re)formation of social networks (Fuller, 2018). Love marriage (although not common) in Amdada is resulting in the decline in the role of the *lami*. It also diminishes the Bahun head of the household responsibility as Ishwa discovered upon the love marriage of his youngest son. Despite Ishwa's best attempts to have his youngest son's marriage arranged, he instead married a Chhetri girl he had met at college 4 years earlier. This was at first difficult for Ishwa to accept, given the importance he places on his role as a Bahun man within the family and wider community: 'It is our culture. The major decisions should be made by me. But the ... major decision is made by Madhish.' Love marriage, therefore, not only affects the status of the father and of the *lami* individually, it also removes a currency in the way *thulo maanche* builds relationships with each other, effectively lessening a Bahun man's influence and status. While Ishwa was admittedly a 'little bit angry' at Madhish's love marriage, when he met Madhish's wife, his troubles were resolved. 'When I saw the girl, everything was erased on my side ... because I am very happy. I am very happy because of her qualification, because of her face and because of her ... simplicity (in terms of dress).' In other words, Ishwa is happy with Madhish's choice in wife because it maintained many of the qualities he would have been looking for when arranging a marriage for his son – high educational qualifications, beauty



and thrift. This further highlights the fact that today in Ludigaun the most highly regarded attribute in a potential marriage partner is their educational attainment. Why? Because there is an explicit recognition that in order to succeed in middle class migration both husband and wife need cultural capital (literacy and education). This is what leads to greater employment opportunities and future economic prosperity. It is, therefore, when the increased importance placed on education (which now values educating both boys and girls) as an economic driver intersects with traditional marriage values that we can see a transformation in 'traditional' dowry practices.

7.1 | Education as dowry

The relationship between educational status and marriage plays out in the village in two significant ways: firstly, young people, particularly young men, are marrying later. Their education is prioritised over marriage, so that marriages are arranged only after the completion of their studies. Ramesh explains:

I will arrange (my sons' marriages) at the right age. When they finish their Masters level they will be 25–26 years old, and then being a guardian I will have to make them marry.

This is a dramatic contrast to the preceding generation where marriage took place in Ishwa and Prithvi's case at 9 and 7 years of age respectively. Allendorf et al. (2017) argue that because Nepali women are expected to be virgins at marriage, marrying young ensures their reputation, virginity and purity remain intact. Bahun young women continue to marry at a younger age (late teens, early twenties) than the young men (mid to late twenties), however, the importance of completing an education for both young men and women has meant that both marry later than previous generations.

Secondly, education has become dowry. Dowry refers to the money, property or gifts that the bride's parents or family give to the bridegroom and his family at the time of marriage (Jha, 2016, p. 216). Demanding of dowry was made illegal in Nepal's Social Reform Act (1976), however, it is still widely practised in various forms throughout Nepal. It remains a matter of primary importance in the institution of marriage among Bahuns in the *terai* (plains) where Nepal borders India, for example (Jha, 2016; Mahato, 2016; Sah, 2008). This prevalence is a distinguishing feature between Terai Bahuns and Hill Bahuns such as the population of Ludigaun. In Ludigaun young villagers like 20 year-old Alok claim that dowry has been abandoned altogether – 'because of education ... the dowry system is removed'. Alok's assertion is not entirely true – token forms of dowry such as gifts of clothing and jewellery are still given to the groom's family by the bride's family at marriage, while the groom's family hosts the wedding celebration and feast. For the most part, however, traditional forms of dowry practice, such as gifts of property and/or large sums of money, have been abandoned in Ludigaun. I argue here, however, that in Ludigaun, dowry is still practised but has taken a new form. Investments made in a daughter's education are the new dowry demands. Alok, while claiming that he will not take traditional forms of dowry, confirms that for villagers, 'education is dowry':

Over here the dowry system is slowly vanishing, that is a good thing ... (Today) first of all a girl has to be educated. If she is educated that is a dowry for her. Education is dowry itself ... If the time of marriage arrives, I will not ask for much dowry from the girl's party. I don't want any dowry, that's what I will say. I will say I don't need it, haha (laughs). I will not take dowry. Dowry is nothing. An educated girl is everything. She can earn money after marriage also. I have that kind of thinking.



Education and its relationship to the institution of dowry has been discussed elsewhere in the South Asian literature. Biao (2005, p. 368) argues,

Modern (English) education, a prerequisite for entering the organised sector, was expensive, and opportunities to enter the organized sector scarce. In a sense, dowry can be seen as the price paid by wealthy families with daughters to purchase those highly profitable men in whom there has been heavy investment.

Rather than lead to the removal or abandonment of the 'traditional' institution of dowry, globalising and modernising processes such as the commodification of education and out-migration, have intensified the practice (Biao, 2005). While this is the case in Ludigaun, there is a marked distinction in the experience of the education for dowry between Terai Bahuns, IT workers in India and villagers in Ludigaun. In the *terai*, changes to dowry practices due to its intersection with education mean a more highly educated man is able to demand a higher dowry price (Mahato, 2016; Sah, 2008), whereas a girl's education may limit her scope of potential suitors and drive up the price of dowry, meaning parents are deterred from educating their daughters to avoid paying exorbitant dowry (Sah, 2008). In India, Biao (2005) demonstrates, in his ethnography of Indian IT workers, that it is not simply a case of demanding high dowries for men who have had a tertiary education and are now working in IT, based on wealth and prestige. The fundamental reason for the strengthening of the 'modern institution of dowry' is as a means of resource transfer – 'a direct reward to the groom's parents for their investment in his education' (Biao, 2005, p. 371). In Biao's context then, dowry underwrites or funds the education of the groom with the groom's family demanding large sums of money based on his education and migration costs. In some cases, as a type of 'forward business' or 'futures market' in small villages, dowry is paid well before the wedding to 'sponsor' the husband-to-be's IT study or emigration (Biao, 2005, p. 372). In Ludigaun the processes of modernity, development and education have intensified an already existent focus on education, which has resulted in transforming the nature of the gift of dowry from wealth in dowry to a focus on the educated person. In Ludigaun funds are no longer given as a form of dowry. Rather, there has been a shift to emphasising the importance of educating girls as an important factor in the status of men.

Investments made in a girl's education should be seen as an investment in the status of the husband-to-be. In Ludigaun the younger generation of men cannot achieve a fully complete modern status unless they have a bride who is also highly educated or able to be highly educated, and able to migrate alongside them. That is, in Ludigaun, for the value of the husband's education to be realised, there must be an identity in the relationship with the bride as a professional couple. It is that identity that is now the focus of dowry practice in Ludigaun. This is the fundamental reason behind women now being included in the frame of the modern; the reason why they are now being educated. It is also why the love marriage of Ishwa's son to a Chhetri girl who was as qualified as him, is, in the long run, acceptable. So while the experience of the older generation of women and their daughters and daughters-in-law is markedly different, in both generations their exclusion or inclusion in education implicates marriage and rests on what will benefit their husbands in terms of status making.

8 | CONCLUSION

In this paper I have demonstrated that education and migration are transformative and so too is marriage. All are pathways for upward mobility in Ludigaun. Yet, in Ludigaun, inequality and differentiation are class, caste and gender based, and because of the missing generation of *buhari*, should also be spoken about in generational terms. The men and children of Ludigaun have been able to study, to



move away and migrate, and to become employed in higher posts largely because of the work undertaken by an older generation of women. Marriage, therefore, has long been the means for the making of Bahun men and the realisation of their *dharma*. Despite the disembedding of social processes such as education as a result of out-migration, marriage remains implicated in contemporary education and status making in Ludigaun.

The convergence of education, migration, generational change and local marriage practices has resulted in the transformation of the institution of dowry so that education has become a form of dowry. On the one hand, these changes mean there is a less marked difference between the educational status of the younger generation of men and their wives compared to the previous generations. It also means the roles of the older generation of men in arranging marriage has been diminished, effectively reducing their status-making capability. On the other hand, the very reason the younger generation of Ludigaun women are being educated, and the very reason the younger generation of Ludigaun men are marrying educated women, is about status making for men and their families – they are doing so in order to improve their social standing; to improve future opportunities for education, migration and employment, and to maintain, reproduce and reach *thulo maanche* status. In this way the relationship between education and marriage in Ludigaun remains both a class concern and a caste concern.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Not all Bahuns are modern and not all are elite. However, some villagers in Ludigaun are considered by the wider community to be both 'modern' and elite. Following Harper and Tarnowski (2007, p. 47), and based on the findings from Ludigaun, elite refers to, a highly politically charged term concealing, rather than revealing, numerous intersecting subject positions. These include the advantages afforded by wealth, educational background, gender, and the accumulation of other forms of social capital, such as experience in village activities that are political-and/or development-related.
- 2 Liechty (2003) first highlighted the relationship between education and the emerging middle-class in his urban-centred ethnography in Kathmandu. More recently Fitzpatrick (2011) drew attention to the emergence of class in rural Nepal where economic differentiation is a result of out-migration and the remittance economy. In Ludigaun the effects of education and migration are growing economic, social and cultural divides, best described through the concept of class rather than caste.
- 3 Based on the findings of a self-administered household survey questionnaire in all 52 households of the hamlets that comprise Ludigaun.

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