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Found and lost - Himal Southasian

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7-9 minutes



A still from Castaway Man Photo : The Justice Project South Asia

The long lines at the venue for the screening of *Castaway Man* at Film Southasia 2015 were a measure of director Kesan Tseten's popularity on his home turf. Two years ago, I had braved similar crowds to watch the director's 2012 documentary, *Who Will Be A Gurkha*, a riveting and delicate work of observation set in a Gurkha recruitment camp. Similar reflections on Nepali society and its traditions run through *Castaway Man*. It is a testimony to the filmmaker's skill that he can draw out these themes over such diverse subjects and get to the heart of the matter, while telling an

absorbing story.

Castaway Man revolves around the charismatic and contested figure of Dor Bahadur Bista, a leading intellectual, anthropologist and writer. Born to a high-caste Chhetri family in Nepal, Bista's seminal book *Fatalism and Development* (1991) is the backbone of the film. Broadly, the text argues that the pervasive influence of "hierarchic fatalism" is a key reason that holds back Nepali society. "Development, therefore, can occur only when the Hindu caste system is thoroughly purged of its 'fatalistic' tendencies," reads a 1994 [review](#) of the book. While these thoughts are by no means unfamiliar to other Southasians, Tseten anchors the emotional location of the film in Nepal. The film itself is structured as a mystery; Bista vanished without a trace in 1995, and *Castaway Man* attempts to find answers linked to this disappearance, as well as everything that the vanished man represented.

The documentary begins in Haridwar, where, according to rumours, Bista was last seen. Basanta Thapa, his translator as well as friend and colleague, walks through the narrow galis of the Indian town, showing a faded photo of Bista to people he encounters. He also speaks to Bista's family in Kathmandu, travels to the mountain community the anthropologist worked with, and interviews the man who saw Bista before he boarded a bus and was never heard of again. Thapa, a former editor of *Himal* magazine, is the stand-in for the director, undertaking the search that moves the film forward across different terrains.

The story of Bista, told through his family and friends, is interspersed with short interviews with a representative cross section of Nepalis speaking about their own experience of caste. These are both insightful as well as heartbreaking – a woman

speaks about being spurned in love because of her caste; an elderly Brahman man harangues about how a poverty stricken high-caste family lacks the support that is given to lower castes and a few others talk of how they would have been able to achieve much more had they not have been held back by the accident of birth. Bista himself was born to privilege, and in a letter he talks about gaining a typical high-caste education before criticising the societal structure he was bound to. As the scholar was at pains to point out, his opposition was to *Bahunbaad* (Brahmanism) not Brahmins. In the film, he emerges as an iconoclastic thinker with a fearless intellect, who began his own research while assisting the Austrian anthropologist Christof von Furer-Haimendorf on his field trips. Bista's voice, speaking with the clipped accent of the region's elite, is featured prominently in the film through audio recording of his interviews, and video footage, besides letters and interviews with those who knew him.

The journey moves from Bista's Kathmandu house to the western region of Chaudhabise in Jumla, where in 1991 Bista began work to create a utopian community. His vision, as the film reveals, was to build a model caste-free commune, by educating and empowering the community. All that is left of the Karnali Institute building, created by Bista, are empty rooms, bereft of books, equipment and furniture. The villagers who worked with him sound similarly bereft, as though they were still coming to terms with the sudden gust of promise that came with Bista, and its abrupt vanishing. Their testimonies laud the excellence of the school he founded, and describe how he drew people and funds from across the world for all the plans he had for the village.

Slowly, the complications in the picture are revealed. Bista, it

appears, had clashed with conservative sections of the area when he intervened in an inter-caste elopement. Then appeared newspaper gossip about Bista and his alleged involvement with a young woman employee of the centre. In perhaps the most moving sequence of the film, the director seeks out this woman, living in obvious poverty, who refers to Bista as “father” throughout the conversation. She was being groomed for success as a way to substantiate the success of the institute, she recalled, and Bista had big plans for her. “Where would I have reached if father were here,” she says through her tears.

In a sequence using archival footage, we see Bista burying a time capsule in the village to be opened 100 years later. The answers in that box are still several decades ahead, but at least that is one mystery that time is likely to unravel.

Till then, there are varying testimonies about the scholar’s sudden disappearance. There are also varying reactions to it – from wonder and betrayal to pain about what could have been. There are people who wonder if he doesn’t want to be found, or if he has forgotten the way back. Through these speculations and laments emerge the difficult lesson to learn from *Castaway Man*: that if the potential for positive change or development emerges from a single person, then it may simply vanish with that one person too.

Ironically, the fragile threads of hope lead to Haridwar, at the heart of the hierarchical inactivity that so riled up the vanished scholar. The film circles back to Thapa in the city of lost souls, speaking to sadhus and priests, who mutter vaguely that they knew the man in the photo. Bista remains lost, but the film makes a sharp comment on what the persistence of caste means in modern Nepal.

As a documentary, *Castaway Man* is a small gem, evoking ideas beyond the scope of its immediate setting. While some knowledge of the region and its intricacies would be handy, it is not an obstacle to being immersed in the narrative. Within Nepal, it has been critiqued for overlooking the post 1990's developments in the country, and has also been called out for its "[conservative treatment](#)" of a figure who was after all a radical. These views certainly merit attention. However, as the best documentaries do, *Castaway Man* manages to leave the audience with important questions. Can we decide the path of our lives? Is it what we are born to, or what we make of it? In searching for Dor Bahadur Bista, it forces us to question who we are, as individuals and as a society.

~Taran N Khan is a Mumbai-based journalist who writes on cinema, Islam and gender. She has been traveling to Kabul since 2006 where she worked closely with Afghan media producers and filmmakers. Her work can be seen at www.porterfolio.net/taran.

~This article is part of a series of column on cinema by Taran N Khan for Himel Southasian. Read her interview with filmmakers of [Drawing the Tiger](#).