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In search of a lone crusader

7-8 minutes

**Kesang Tseten's new documentary explores two enigmas
— caste and Dor Bahadur Bista**



When I was younger, but old enough to understand love and marriage, my mum used to say that we should marry into our own caste because intercaste marriages only invited trouble. My mum was born into a Bhusal Chhetri family, whose forefathers were once Bahuns but who had been demoted after one of them

married a woman of a 'low' caste. When she was 17, my mom ran away with a Magar man and became an outcaste for three years until my father died in an accident and my mum's side of the family came to her 'rescue'.

In the years that have passed since, intercaste marriages have become more acceptable, at least in urban areas. A war has been fought in the name of liberating people from caste (and class) oppression; the words 'proportional representation' and 'inclusion' have entered common parlance; and ethnicity-based federalism has stirred up passionate debates across the country. But as the opening lines in Kesang Tseten's new documentary, *Castaway Man*, put it, caste and its hierarchical structure persist. A marriage with a Dalit family is still not tolerated. The identity of a person based on her caste and ethnicity—and the stereotypes that come with them—still remain rigid. The culture of caste is too pervasive to allow any change, and so deeply ingrained is it, that Tseten wonders in his film if one man, who challenged it, calling it the reason behind the fatalistic attitudes that push back the country's modernisation, disappeared as a result.

That the film is more about caste and less about anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista, the eponymous castaway man, is apparent from the opening frames Tseten uses to set the audience's mood. The film opens with the (in)famous lines spoken by the founder of modern-day Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah: Nepal is a garden of four castes and 36 tribes. This is followed by two other facts, about how the country code of 1854 laid out the caste hierarchy and how it remained in place until 1963. People might disagree with Bista's thesis in his famous book, *Fatalism and Development*, that the origins of fatalism—the feelings of little or no agency—lie in

Brahmanism, but when the kings and the laws of the land recognise the caste hierarchy and enforce it for more than a century, no one can argue that damage has not been done. When Kamis remain untouchables for generations, when Magars are defined as the non-enslavable alcohol drinkers, people are bound to feel that the family they are born into determines their character, their status in society, their fate.

The common Nepalis that Tseten interviews for the film give a glimpse into how artificial the concept of caste is and yet how deeply internalised it is. As Tseten shows a man or a woman talking about their views on caste, he leaves the audience guessing about their ethnicity until the man or the woman says it out loud. And when they identify themselves with one caste or the other, the audience realises how deeply the system penetrates. One young Danuwar man wonders why the so-called 'high-caste' people think that his group of people have nothing good in them. A young Thami man tries hard to differentiate his ethnicity from 'impure' Kamis. And a young Puri woman concludes that the inter-caste marriage she ran into was a mistake. No matter how hard people try to critique the system and detach themselves from it, as Tseten says, their caste identity is there in each instance.

How does one then talk about caste without talking about caste, without making it more real each time one utters it? For Bista, who with his attack on Brahminism made enemies with the ruling elite and with the high-caste population, the answer lay in rallying an army of Khas people in Jumla, who he hoped would fight the system. In a little village in the laps of grey hills, Bista opened the Karnali Institute to mobilise these people, taught them to identify themselves as alcohol-drinking Khas community and fight the

caste-based bias. He wanted to create a community that proved his thesis that development was only possible when the Hinduism-backed caste hierarchy was done away with. But before his theory could be tested, Bista left Chaudhabisa village and descended to Nepalgunj, from where he boarded a bus to Chisapani and disappeared—in 1995, at the age of 67.

Tseten tries to solve the mystery behind Bista's disappearance by travelling westward to Hardwar in Uttarakhand, India, where Bista was rumoured to have been last sighted. Basanta Thapa, executive director of Himal Association, and a friend of Bista who had been asked by the anthropologist to translate *Fatalism and Development* into Nepali, plays the role of the onscreen detective. The men do not solve the mystery, but give ample hints as to Bista's fate.

While in Jumla, Bista made an enemy of a local leader by challenging the jari system, in which the man who marries someone else's wife has to pay a certain amount in compensation to the woman's first husband.

A volunteer teacher fired from the Karnali Insitute after a dispute over the construction of a wall later published a piece about the alleged affair between Bista and a young student. Could it be that a man who fought against the caste system was put down by another stupid social construct—gender? Or did he kill himself? His daughter, Asha Basnet, reveals in an interview that Bista was so against the rituals that he wanted to leave without anyone's having to perform the cremation rites. Or was he so frustrated with the entrenched system of caste that he had to escape further west? Could he have decided to become a sanyasi in Haridwar, in an ashram where sadhus are forbidden to ask about each other's

background, even though this system too is steeped in Hindu traditions? Where does the Karnali end and the Ganga begin?

Twenty years after his disappearance, the country is in a gridlock, with the debate on ethnicity-based federalism as the roadblock. If Bista did indeed meet with death in 1995, he did not get to witness the Maoist insurgency and its aftermath, which, although never officially acknowledged, are inseparable from his ideas propounded in Fatalism and Development. Tseten does not explore the politicisation of caste in the film, but to anyone familiar with the current affairs, it hovers in the background. The relationship between caste, power and politics has been there before and is still at play. The question is: How does one break the chain? According to Tseten, people have to make up their own minds.

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