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## The Man in the Picture – Kesang Tseten’s Castaway Man

5-6 minutes

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The opening images of *Castaway Man* gets us down at the Haridwar railway station. There the camera follows Basanta Thapa, author and former editor of Himal magazine, who wanders through the ghaats and alleys holding a black and white portrait photograph of a man. The man, captured in a medium shot, is garbed in *dhaka topi*, *daura* and coat, his right shoulder slightly tilted to emphasize a pose that gives him the air of a *neta* or a high post *hakim* at a government office. Thapa proceeds to question the locals, the meditating sadhus, the Nepali Brahman community and the police authorities if they recognize this person from around here. All of them shake their heads unsure but are curious to know who the person in the picture is (so are we). Thapa gives them a sparse answer, “He’s a big man, a professor”, and refrains from elaborating any further.

Kesang Tseten’s new documentary is about the man in the picture, the controversial Nepali anthropologist, social scientist and public intellectual Dor Bahadur Bista.

Switching us back to Kathmandu, we see Thapa busy at his work table translating Bista’s book that gave him scandalous popularity. *Fatalism and Development*, where Bista poured his radical and

straightforward commentary on the socio-economic issues of Nepal.

Bista sounds straight from the shoulder as he's heard on the sound track saying, "Fatalism and development are opposite ends of the same spectrum. By fatalism I mean when people are continuously fed, bombarded, brainwashed with the idea that ultimately, what you are today is not a result of what you made yourself but was determined in your previous life or by some supernatural phenomenon or divine power." The audio is taken from his interview with the American anthropologist Jim Fisher.

His work was grounded in unveiling what he called the evils of Brahamanism, or brahamanical value system, as a narrow minded and highly prejudiced system that interprets Hinduism in favour of only a certain class of people and alienates and discredits the culture and identity of other ethnic minorities. This he saw as something that has been sheltering the caste based discrimination that has been going on forever in Nepal.

It is the movie's accomplishment that it takes the ideas of Bista as a context and juxtaposes a collage of Nepali people from different ethnic background who directly pour their dissatisfaction on caste based hierarchy. A youth from a minority group confesses that if he had been born to a Chhetri or Brahman family he would have had more opportunities, while an elderly Brahman man is unhappy with the situation where a poor Brahaman wouldn't have the same luxury of quota and reservations that a *dalit* or *janjati* may enjoy. The film finds its centre in these snippets of voices.

Tseten intricately structures the narrative as a mystery but it's a freewheeling mystery. Thapa is our investigator, someone of that

ilk who wants to re-live the experiences of Bista that helped him shape his theories in his book. So he talks with Bista's children, who are now reaching the same age their father was when he disappeared in 1996 (at the age of 69). His children remember him best as a rebel, insistent to stand by his views from impromptu debates with their grandfather over an issue as trivial as bowing down to touch a *pandit's* feet to caustic statements like the Shah Kings of Nepal have Magar lineage.

As Thapa and Tseten try to piece together the final days of Bista before he disappeared, they reach a place called Chaudhabise in Jumla, where Bista spent lots of his later years operating the Karnali Institute with the aim of educating and reforming the backward communities. In the most captivating section of the documentary, a local caretaker of the Karnali Institute building takes Thapa through the abandoned building and we are shown what's left of Bista's Karnali Institute – library with no books, vacant rooms with furniture and equipment stolen, rickety wooden floorboards and beams feeding the termites.

Maybe he was alone in his struggle and the problems too big because as the film culminates, words from his journals and letters resonate a form of despair and anger. His frustrations were growing because he was unable to make the people understand the faults in the rituals and customs that sided with exploitation in the name of justice.

*Castaway Man* searches for the elusive Bista even after it ends. And it leaves us in Haridwar where it was reported Bista was last seen. Thapa, in a dismal reflection, says, "Why would he settle in Haridwar of all the places?", and we ask the same question. As for the movie it may not have the details about Bista's whereabouts

but it does let us find him in his work and ideas!