

culanth.org

Theorizing Privilege with Dor Bahadur Bista

By Dannah Dennis

7-8 minutes

Dor Bahadur Bista's (1991) *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization* is the only book of which I own three copies. I bought my first copy in 2012, when I was doing my graduate coursework. While preparing to write my qualifying essay on the anthropology of Nepal, I happened to notice that Bista was cited in the bibliography of nearly every book that I was reading, so I ordered *Fatalism and Development* online. I skimmed through the small volume, noting that it tackled a large topic—the thorny question of Nepal's lack of development, relative to other countries—and offered a bold and possibly controversial analysis. In a nutshell, Bista argued that caste hierarchy has been an impediment to the development of Nepali society because the high-caste elites who are overrepresented in government, administration, and public life are fundamentally invested in maintaining their own positions of power rather than working for the collective good.

I acquired my second copy about halfway through my fieldwork. Although *Fatalism and Development* had originally been published in 1991, the text was frequently referenced in debates over the

contentious issue of dividing Nepal into federal states, which I was tracking during my fieldwork in 2014–2015. As the process of writing a new constitution was gridlocked over the question of whether the boundaries of federal states should be drawn along ethnic lines, some conservative commentators railed against Bista’s central thesis, arguing that his concept of Brahmanism (*bahunbaad*) was responsible for stirring up the ethnic activism that had been a motivating force in Nepali politics for decades. I realized that I’d made a mistake by leaving my first copy of Bista behind in Charlottesville, Virginia, and bought my second copy at Mandala Bookpoint in Kantipath, Kathmandu. I read the book more closely this time, underlining many passages and discussing it with several interlocutors.

One conversation in particular stands out in my memory: In March 2015, I interviewed a high-caste man from a wealthy family background, well educated and well-traveled. Shortly after we arrived at the upscale café where we had agreed to meet, it began to pour down rain; thus, what might otherwise have been a relatively short conversation turned into a rambling three-hour *chiya-gaph* session (although he drank Gorkha beer instead of *chiya*, Nepali tea). He was the first to introduce Bista’s book into the conversation, arguing that Brahmanism was just “some anthropological concept” invented by Bista, with no real basis in the realities of Nepali political life. Here is an excerpt from the transcript of our conversation:

T: And what is Brahminism? It’s just like an attitude, an institutionalized something. How can you define that? You cannot say like it’s “Whitism”? Can you say that? Like Brahminism in Nepal in context of U.S., like Whitism?

D: Yeah. No, we call it white privilege.

T: White privilege? But, again, like, that's very vague, what does it mean?

D: Well, it shows up in a lot of ways. If you're white, you're more likely to be accepted for a job. Or if you're white, you're more likely to be admitted to a certain kind of school. Like, these things are real, this does really happen in the U.S.

T: Not to the extent like what you believe in, right? Not to the extent of what you say? Like, okay, it happens sometimes, but then again there are check and balance measures, right?

I did my best to assure him that white privilege does in fact shape life in the United States to a very great extent, but I don't think he believed me. He continued to assert that whatever I might say about the United States, Brahmanism isn't an important factor in Nepali political life. I wondered to myself, "if Bista's analysis of Brahmanism isn't relevant, then why are we sitting here talking about his book almost twenty-five years after it was published?"

I received my third copy of *Fatalism and Development* as a gift in 2018. I had spent part of the summer leading a graduate reading seminar on the theme of "The Family and the State" at the Martin Chautari research center in Kathmandu. Although the course was not offered for academic credit, the participants showed up every week with scrupulously annotated readings and offered insightful commentary on the overlapping social and political formations of "family" and "state," both in Nepal and beyond. On the last day of the class, one of the participants thanked me and presented me with a copy of *Fatalism and Development*. She said she thought that I might already have a copy, but she had decided to give it to

me as a parting gift because our discussions had reminded her often of Bista's book, particularly with regard to his analysis of how high-caste family structure and child socialization reproduce the values and practices of Brahmanism. As a young Brahman woman who was committed to pursuing gender equality in Nepal, she found inspiration in Bista's work.

Why is it that only people who study Nepal (whether Nepalis or *bideshis*, foreigners) read *Fatalism and Development*? To be sure, it is not a perfect book; one might argue, for instance, that Bista sometimes relies on generalizations and over-simplifications in pursuit of his analytical objective. However, he is no more guilty of this than was Edmund Leach (1970) in *Political Systems of Highland Burma* or E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1958) in *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Why was I required to slog through both of those venerable tomes in my graduate coursework, while I came across Bista by mere happenstance? It cannot be said that Bista's analysis is purely local in its scope; since that rainy-day conversation in the café, it has informed my own intellectual grappling with white supremacy in the United States. For me, *Fatalism and Development* serves as a reminder that anthropology as it is practiced in the United States continues to be a rather provincial discipline; while ethnographic data may come from anywhere, capital-T Theory is expected to come from thinkers firmly associated with the academic traditions and institutions of the global North. By providing an introduction to the life and work of Dor Bahadur Bista, Kesang Tseten's film *Castaway Man* offers those of us who work within such traditions and institutions an opportunity to broaden our horizons.

References

Bista, Dor Bahadur. 1991. *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization*. Hyderabad, India: Orient Blackswan.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1958. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Leach, Edmund. 1970. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London: Athlone.