Masculinity and Modern Slavery in Nepal: Transitions into freedom, by Matthew Maycock

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REFERENCES


1 This well-structured book uses perceived forms of masculinity as an analytical tool to investigate the transition of former bonded labourers into freedom. Though the case study deals with the particular situation of the Kamaiya – contextualised and localised within their experience of coping with modernity – its findings and insight will help understand the struggle of other groups in various localities in South Asia and beyond.

2 In the first chapter, Maycock introduces his main theoretical tools, namely masculinity, agency and modernity, all in reciprocal and intertwined relationships with each other. Their application is contextualised within the emancipation of the Kamaiya from slavery in the year 2000 and localised in Nepal’s far western Tarai (lowland) region bordering India. Using the notion of masculinity as an analytical lens to capture and to explore how Kamaiya men, in their ever-changing lives, express it proves to be a worthwhile approach. It enables the practices and narratives of Kamaiya men, as they navigate their gendered identities over a range of cultural, spatial and other variables (Tharu, Brahmanic, urban etc), to be considered on different scales. Maycock identifies hegemonic (Brahmanic) masculinities to which the masculinities performed by Kamaiya men respond, whether by rejecting or appropriating them (p5). He focuses his analysis on how Kamaiya men experience change in agency and how they think and talk about it. This has to be understood against the background of modernity, the idea of which in the context of Nepal has been distorted through its association with
development and social progress. According to Maycock, one example of the intersection of adult masculinity, modernity and agency is the Kamaiya ‘breadwinner’ masculinity which men had to adopt after their transition to freedom – a situation that was not applicable at the time of bonded labour (p12).

Chapters 2 and 3 are an introduction to the Kamaiya system and situate the research sites. Today, the Kamaiya are associated with formerly bonded agricultural labourers from the Tharu community, an indigenous (janajati) group in Nepal who live mostly in the western Tarai where they constitute almost half of the population, but who were marginalised after the eradication of malaria and the resettlement of Paharis (Bahun and Chettri from the hills). The name itself refers to the form of bonded labour bordering on slavery that the people who go by that name were subject to (p33). There are approximately 100,000 Kamaiya in Nepal, almost half of whom are to be found in Kailali, a district in Nepal’s far western Tarai region where the two field sites were located. Multiple fieldtrips were conducted in urban and rural settings – in Dhangadhi (Kailali’s administrative and economic centre) and in Kampur basti (a rural area in Kailali). These places offer different opportunities and experiences for freed Kamaiya men (eg driving a rickshaw in Dhangadhi, landownership in Kampur). Fieldtrips were conducted over a period of nine years (2008–2017), after the abolition of the Kamaiya system in the year 2000. The main research methods consisted of life history interviews combined with participant observations. On the basis of these, Maycock compiled detailed personal narratives representing some 45 life histories mostly of Kamaiya men (along with some People’s Liberation Army cadres, Bahun and Dalit men). The analyses of the extensive fieldwork are presented in three chapters, heuristically structured around bodies, work and family.

One occupation for uneducated young Kamaiya men from Kampur basti is driving a rickshaw in Dhangadhi, which brings out certain embodied masculinities in them: in this case physical fitness and specific types of behaviour, such as the races between rickshaw drivers described by Maycock, during which they prove their ability to endure pain and show that they are strong, thereby, as Maycock claims, exchanging physical capital for economic and social capital. The focus on this masculinity partly explains the paradox of a properly functioning body being essential for their livelihood yet being put at risk by their regular drinking and smoking. Drinking alcohol plays an important part in the performance of their masculinity, in terms of consumption and competition. The place where alcohol is drunk is relevant here, and Maycock gives a vivid description of a bar near Kampur basti: a prominent way to gain prestige is to avoid homemade liquor and to drink bottled beer in a bar. The more beer consumed the better. In these male spaces, the proven capacity to drink a significant amount of alcohol also serves as a marker that sets them apart from other people (women and upper-caste men), which is further underlined in talk about girlfriends and in jokes about the weakness of Bahun men. While the described Kamaiya masculinities could be read as a counter discourse to Brahmanic masculinity, the picture becomes more complex when analysing the use of whitening creams by Kamaiya men. According to Maycock, these are used by Kamaiya men in urban areas and are totally rejected by their peers in rural areas, emphasising the complexity of Kamaiya masculinities.

After gaining freedom from bonded labour, Kamaiya men had to find work on the labour market. This was the first time that the community’s men experienced unemployment as well as employment. Having to earn a living for themselves and their
families creates circumstances that lead to ‘breadwinner’ masculinities, of which Maycock distinguishes four characteristics that are regarded as very successful: ‘the man who has land; the man involved in politics; the educated man; and the man who moves’ (p145). Movement on different scales – rural to urban, Nepal to India, Nepal to other countries – is mirrored in some cases in different life stages and results in particular localised masculinities (eg visiting prostitutes in the urban context). The necessity of regular mobility if Kamaiya men are to sustain their respective family – a destiny they share with the majority of poor people in the Global South – also has an impact on family life, as discussed in the last analytical chapter about the emergence of Kamaiya breadwinner masculinities after freedom and the somewhat unexpected implications this may have for marriage and fatherhood.

With his nuanced understanding of masculinities as an analytical tool, Maycock presents a new perspective from which to capture the lived realities of former bonded labourers in their transition to freedom, and thereby contributes to the fields of slavery and gender studies, while also offering a rich ethnographic account of an often forgotten region.

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