



Conférence

Ghosts of Hierarchies Past: Disasters, Responsibility, and Blame in Nepal

The hierarchies of the past are challenged, politically and socially, in two important, contested, and interconnected fields in contemporary Nepal: in caste/ethnic relations and in the construction of national identity. In both areas blame (i.e. accusations of responsibility for harm) and recrimination were very evident during 2015, when the country faced two massive shocks, namely the earthquakes of April-May and the blockade of September-December. And yet there were and have been glimmers of hope too, in some moves by idealistic youth in both fields to *take* responsibility.

Aspects of Dumont's theory of hierarchy are helpful for understanding this situation, for all that the encompassment of the impure by the pure is deeply and strongly rejected in today's Nepal, as in the rest of South Asia. Dumont can be supplemented by Ambedkar on the graded nature of hierarchy and the importance of contempt in constructing it. As heads of households, members of the elite no longer see themselves as responsible for large numbers of hangers-on, as they would have done only two generations ago. Only political parties, through the mobilization of economic and licencing networks, have the resources to support large-scale hierarchies. The relative equalization of esteem, and the flattening of responsibility, on the part of individuals, combined with the pre-eminence of parties (still dominated by gerontocracies) as mobilizers of hierarchy, deference, and money—this combination of factors may help to explain the corruption, short-termism, and apparent lack of any substantial political vision on the part of Nepal's leaders over the last 25 years.

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