



*Routledge ISS Gender, Sexuality and Development Studies*

# **MASCULINITY AND MODERN SLAVERY IN NEPAL**

## **TRANSITIONS INTO FREEDOM**

Matthew Maycock



‘What does it mean to be “free”? Maycock’s work on bonded labour in South Asia is an important contribution to the discussions and debates around modern slavery. By paying attention to the emergent expressions, perceptions and experiences of freedom, this book links the ethnographic specificity of the Kamaiya system of Nepal with the more significant global debates on contemporary slavery. Maycock adds to our understanding of subaltern masculinities and the historical and political contexts of masculinity and servitude.’

*Radhika Chopra, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology,  
University of Delhi, India*

‘This is an extremely valuable addition to the growing body of work that addresses masculine identities in the South Asian context. The book’s ethnographic focus on subaltern masculinities is still a largely under-explored topic for the region. Maycock’s analysis of the lives and actions of men from the Kamaiya (bonded labour) community of Nepal not only provides important insights into the meaning of “slavery” and “freedom”, but also allows for a sophisticated understanding of relationships between masculinity and the symbolism of property, consumption, education, marriage, fatherhood and family life. The book will be of great interest to both scholars and practitioners who seek a nuanced engagement with processes of “development”.’

*Sanjay Srivastava, Professor, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, India*

‘This book is about the complexity in one of the oldest forms of slavery in the world, the *Kamaiya* slavery of Nepal. *Kamaiya* slavery is equally complicated—a cocktail of the caste system, religion, warped masculinity, violence, ethnic discrimination, and a tough, physical environment. This book provides exactly the kind of insight we need to get to grips with the slavery of today. It pries us loose from simplistic know-it-all ideas that conceal the tangled and tortuous, but crucial, facts and understanding we need to move from slavery to liberation. Very importantly in this book, we hear from slaves and the survivors of slavery, the very voices that are normally neglected yet have the truest sense of slavery. Recommended!’

*Kevin Bales, Professor of Contemporary Slavery,  
University of Nottingham, UK*



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# Masculinity and Modern Slavery in Nepal

South Asia is the region with the highest number of slaves globally according to the Global Slavery Index. Bonded labour affects between 15 and 20 million labourers within the region, and is shaped by locally specific interconnections between ethnicity, class, caste and, critically, gender structures. *Masculinity and Modern Slavery in Nepal* explores the role of masculinity in shaping the structures and experience of slavery and subsequent freedom.

While many I/NGOs and human rights organisations use freedom from slavery as a powerful and emotive goal, the lived reality of freedom for many bonded labourers often results in disappointment and frustration as they navigate diverse expectations of masculinity. Taking Nepal as a case study, the book illustrates how men's gendered experiences of bondedness and freedom can inform perspectives on the transition to freedom and modernity in South Asia more broadly. Researchers of modern slavery, gender studies, and South Asian studies will be interested in the rich analysis on offer in this book.

**Matthew Maycock** is a Learning and Development Researcher at the Scottish Prison Service, UK and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow.

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### **Masculinity and Modern Slavery in Nepal**

Transitions into Freedom

*Matthew Maycock*

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**Matthew Maycock**

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**For Naomi**





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# Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BASE	Backward Society Education
BNAC	Britain Nepal Academic Council
CA	Constituent Assembly
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CPN(UML)	Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)
DDC	District Development Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
FKS	Freed Kamaiya Society
GAD	Gender and Development
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEFONT	General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
INSEC	Informal Sector Service Centre
IRs	Indian Rupees
ISRC	Intensive Study & Research Centre
KPUS	Kamaiya Pratha Unmulan Samaj
MS-Nepal	Danish Association for Intentional Cooperation
NA	Nepali Army
NC	Nepali Congress
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NLSS	Nepal Living Standards Survey
NPC	National Planning Commission
NRs	Nepali Rupees
OMCT	World Organization Against Torture

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PLA	Peoples Liberation Army
PW	Maoist People's War
RPP	Rastriya Prajatantra Party
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections
UCPN(M)	United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
UML	United Marxist-Leninists
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNMIN	United Mission to Nepal
VDC	Village Development Committee
VDCs	Village Development Committees
WID	Women in Development
YCL	Young Communist League

# **Use of Tharu/Nepali words and calendar**

Both Nepali and certain Tharu languages are written in Devanagari script. In changing Nepali and Tharu words used in this book into roman script, I have followed Turner ([1931] 1990).

Throughout the manuscript I used the Gregorian calendar, changing dates as required when specific sources used the Nepali calendar.





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# 1 Introduction

Freedom from slavery is a compelling and emotive goal for many International Non-Governmental Organization (INGOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and human rights organisations. However, the lived reality of freedom for many former bonded labourers such as the Kamaiya has often been one of disappointment and frustration. This book illustrates how men's gendered experiences of the transition to freedom utilising masculinity as a theoretical lens, constitute an illuminating and important perspective not only on this transition but also on what it means to be a man freed from slavery. This introduction will provide a theoretical and methodological context for the subsequent chapters as well as outlining the structure of the book. This chapter discusses three central concepts: masculinity, agency, and modernity, which guide the analysis of the Kamaiya men's accounts of their lives. The chapters that follow combine the theories considered here with material collected during the multiple periods of fieldwork and ongoing engagement with the men in and from the Dhangadhi and Kampur *basti*.<sup>1</sup>

There have been, and still are, many forms of slavery throughout South Asia. This is the region with the highest number of slaves globally, with 15 to 20 million bonded labourers (Bales 2004, 2007). Of these, bonded labour is a particular indication of slavery taking local manifestations shaped by locally specific interconnections between ethnicity, class, caste, and critically, gender. Despite the importance of gender in shaping the structures and experience of bonded labour (and subsequent freedom for freed groups), this is not the focus of the existing contemporary slavery literature. Within this context, this book will focus on and examine aspects of the gendered experience of the transition to freedom, as well as the lived experience of freedom itself. The main purpose of this book is to explore various aspects of Kamaiya masculinities as they change as a consequence of this transition to freedom.

The Kamaiya are a sub-group of the Tharu indigenous ethnic group found predominantly in Nepal, but also in parts of India. Prior to 2000, the majority of the Kamaiya were bonded labourers. In 2000, the Kamaiya system of bonded labour formally ended. The main contribution this book makes is to research masculinities in South Asia and transitions from bonded labour to freedom. In focusing on Kamaiya masculinities following freedom, this book contributes to

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research that explicitly considers masculinities in development studies research. Considering masculinities as the focus of the study illustrates how men's gendered experiences of bondedness and subsequent freedom constitute an illuminating perspective on these transitions. Principally, this book seeks to illustrate the relevance of masculinities in improving understanding of such transitions by investigating the various ways in which my male Kamaiya respondents are adapting and responding to their transition to freedom and how this has changed their masculinities in two fieldwork settings. This is explored in the three main chapters; bodies and consumption, work and migration, family and relationships, which provide different perspectives on Kamaiya masculinities following freedom. These cumulatively facilitate a perspective on the changing ways in which Kamaiya masculinities form through interaction with other masculinities. The nature of the interactions between subaltern and hegemonic masculinities is of critical relevance: in each of the chapters that follow, they emerge as a consistent influence shaping post-bonded Kamaiya masculinities.

Centrally this book responds to the question: what happens to masculinities following freedom from a system of bonded labour? What aspects of post-freedom Kamaiya masculinities appear to be 'malleable' (or changeable), and which are 'sticky' (resist change) in reference to pre-freedom performances of masculinity? These are not questions that have been asked within existing research on contemporary slavery, masculinity studies as well as research on the Kamaiya system specifically. This question is answered by exploring a variety of ethnographic material collected through multiple periods of fieldwork in the Kailali district. Methodologically, this book is based on ethnographic research undertaken in 2009 (eight months) and shorter visits in 2011, 2014, and 2017. This eight-year timeframe has facilitated the reflection and refinement of my initial insights into the impacts of freedom on Kamaiya masculinities. Fieldwork focused on generating the material for analysis through ethnographic methods, principally interviews and participant observation. These methods concentrated on men's experiences and testimonies of the Kamaiya system, the transition to freedom and post-freedom experiences.

One translation of *Kamaiya* from Nepali into English denotes that this word means landless. The slow evolution of the meaning of this word, away from being so closely linked to a pre-freedom situation of landlessness, points towards the incoherence of both the transition to freedom as well as the lived experience of freedom. 'Freedom' for many freed Kamaiya is in many ways similar to their pre-freedom lives within the Kamaiya system. While many (but not all) Kamaiya were free in 2017, freed Kamaiya have had to find ways to survive with extremely limited resources.

Within South Asia, Nepal continues to have significant numbers of people living in slavery. Bales (2004) estimates that 2.5 million people were living in slavery in Nepal. Within the context of the significant diversity of the experience of contemporary slavery in Nepal, the Kamaiya are a group of former bonded labourers from the wider Tharu ethnic group. Prior to 2000, the vast majority of the Kamaiya were bonded labourers. In 2000, the Nepal government formally

ended the Kamaiya system of bonded labour. The primary purpose of this book is to explore various aspects of Kamaiya masculinities as they evolve as a consequence of the transition to and lived experience of freedom. This context is shaped to a great extent by the recent Maoist People's War (1996–2006) and subsequent political upheavals in Nepal.

Throughout this book, I intertwine the theories outlined below with the material that follows. Each theory is utilised to shape the analysis in the three main chapters of this book. Although the concepts guide the analysis to a great extent at different times, masculinity is the principal theory and analytical tool that I use in this book, and I explore this first.

## **Masculinity**

The way that I utilise theories of masculinity in this book provides the main analytical lens through which I explore the lives of the Kamaiya men and is at the core of my exploration of the Kamaiya men's narratives. Masculinity is multiple, variable and contested, and Cornwall and Lindisfarne's (1994: 12) description of it provides a useful starting point: '[Masculinity is] neither tangible nor an abstraction whose meaning is everywhere the same. In practice, people operate according to many different notions of masculinity'.

This helps to locate the focus on certain practices and behaviours through which we can view male gendered identities. The focus on masculinity as a variable also moves the analysis beyond thinking about it as fixed and complete. Contradiction and complexity, partly caused by the interaction of gender with other identities, are embraced within a broader anthropological context in which gender discourses vary significantly both within and between cultures: 'The experience of gender, of being an engendered subject, is given meaning in discourse and in practices which those discourses inform' (Moore 1994a: 143).

Discourse, as considered by Moore, has a number of dimensions, not least in indicating that gender is a process and is necessarily 'never fixed or finished' (Moore 2007: 115). Moore identifies a disparity between dominant cultural categories and the day-to-day experience of gender relations (*ibid.*: 145), thereby indicating one of the limits of discourse and the necessity for locating this in the wider processes of societal change.<sup>2</sup> This book explores the implications of the transition to freedom: does it increase or reduce the range of masculine subject positions available to Kamaiya men?

The availability of certain discourses in a given time and space are significant considerations from this perspective. Some positions in masculine discourse become 'hegemonic' (as I consider below), and, therefore, result in specific constellations of discourse positions relating to the predominance of certain constellations of masculinity. This necessitates considering why some subject positions are occupied and others not in the historical context that defines the parameters of such choices making some positions more attractive (and hegemonic) than others. Wendy Hollway's (1984) conceptualisation of 'investment' is a useful insight in understanding why particular subject positions are occupied when a

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broad range of positions relating to masculinity are available. For Hollway, investment replaces choice which facilitates a move away from thinking about subject positions occupied as a consequence of rational choice (ibid.: 238). The self is established through investment in a range of subject positions over a period (Moore 2007: 118). Such investment is somewhere between emotional commitment and vested interest, and relates to both the perceived and the real benefits provided by a specific position:

... investment is a matter not just of emotional satisfaction, but of the real, material, social and economic benefits which are the reward of the senior man, the good wife, the powerful mother or the dutiful daughter in many social situations.

(Moore 1994: 65)

The institutionalisation of power is particularly important here, as it contributes to making some positions more desirable than others. Hollway contextualises this notion of investment in certain subject positions with the idea of intersubjectivity, i.e. one is always positioned in relation to the other people about one. Masculinity interacts with other forms of social identity and cannot be considered in isolation. This is a significant factor influencing the plurality of masculinities. Within the focus on gender and conflict, Cynthia Cockburn (2007) outlines the notion of intersectionality<sup>3</sup> to explore how gender interacts and informs the shape of a range of identities, incorporating race and class. Intersectionality matters in my research as this provides a way of thinking about the complexity of the interactions between various forms of identity. For example, throughout this book, I consider the multiple ways in which constructions of caste and ethnicity are critically important to identity and play a vital role in constructions of Kamaiya masculinities.

Having outlined how masculinity is considered and how this relates to discourse, I now consider how multiple masculinities are configured. I begin with an examination of Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and its usefulness in the South Asian context. I critically engage with hegemonic masculinity and examine which parts of the theory will be useful in subsequent chapters, and conversely which aspects of it need reworking in light of the material that follows.

For Connell (2005: 77), hegemonic masculinity is:

... one form of masculinity rather than others that is culturally exalted.... Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy.

This helps to clarify the dual function of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. the domination of specific masculinities over femininity generally and certain configurations of masculinity. Connell sees hegemonic masculinity as dominant over

‘subordinate’, ‘complicit’ and ‘marginalised’ masculinities. One of the many forms of masculinity that she describes is protest masculinity (2005: 109), which, she argues, contests the current hegemonic form for dominance. Hegemonic masculinity is reliant on these various manifestations of masculinity and the negative implications of being non-hegemonic (sometimes feminising such positions): ‘Hegemonic masculinities define successful ways of “being a man”; in so doing, they define other masculine styles as inadequate or inferior’ (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994: 3).

Consequently, hegemonic masculinities can constitute the standards by which other masculinities are measured. This provides a way to explore the influence of dominant forms of masculinity within a context in which the vast majority of masculine performance does not always refer to the dominant style. One of the central aspects of being a man relates to how hegemonic masculinity is negotiated, appropriated and, at times, resisted. This opens up the possibility of diverse responses to hegemonic forms and diverse masculinities. Connell (2005) developed a notion of hegemonic masculinity to provide an account of how certain (hegemonic) forms of masculinity predominate over others in specific places and times. This view has become the pre-eminent way of theorising relationships between multiple masculinities. Connell states that masculinities are multiple, and masculine identities are influenced not just by relationships between women and men but also by relationships between men. Her theory of hegemonic masculinity is essentially an account of how various masculinities interact with and influence one another within a framework in which they are constantly competing with and challenging one another. It is important to recognise that there have been a number of substantial criticisms of this theory, including Anderson’s inclusive masculinity. Anderson’s theory of inclusive masculinity implies less hierarchical interactions between masculinities (Anderson 2009: 2010).

I consider Connell’s (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity as useful in the analysis of the material that follows. Therefore, I examine how the performances of Kamaiya masculinities outlined in this book respond to, at times reject while at others appropriate, hegemonic (Brahmanic) masculinities. Despite this, Wetherell and Edley (1999) indicate that in many local settings, being a man may be configured around performances of masculinity that find coherence in being distant from local manifestations of hegemonic masculinity. Such responses do not necessarily change the hegemonic position of certain masculinities in specific localities, but they do change how we theorise subaltern masculinities. These findings resonate with Osella and Osella’s (2006) research in Kerala considered in more detail below.

Having outlined how masculinity is contemplated in this book, I now discuss how this resonates in this research in far-west Nepal. It is necessary to establish which masculinities are hegemonic in my fieldwork sites to meaningfully utilise the theory of hegemonic masculinity outlined here. This equates to a focus on Brahmanic masculinities, providing a context within which Kamaiya men negotiate their masculinities.