

# “Religion doesn’t enter politics in Nepal in quite the same explicit way that it does in India” – Professor David Gellner



*Prior to his participation in the 'Who are the middle class in South Asia' panel at the LSE South Asia Centre summit, **Professor David Gellner** spoke with **Ananya Dasgupta** about his preliminary research findings in Nepal, and how the high level of migration has been breaking down caste boundaries.*

## **What are the findings and highlights of your research survey with Dr. Krishna Adhikari?**

Indirectly it was taking inspiration from Bourdieu's *Distinction*, more directly from the more recent study that's been done in Britain on *Culture, Class, Distinction* by Bennett and others at Open University and Mike Savage here at the LSE. We wanted to look at the cultural aspects of class in the Nepali context and we were also interested to see whether or not that could throw light on the Dalit question. We had a completely open mind about it. We are still working on the results. It looks as if, at least in the village context, there actually isn't that much cultural difference. In a village context, people actually share the same culture. There aren't any sharp class divides in terms of cultural absolutes. You might have found that Dalits have a very distinct culture [in the past]. They have obviously traditionally and historically had separate cultural traditions, but those don't seem to loom particularly large now. The more interesting and more impressive thing is that the village basically has a shared culture. The first kickback you'll get in a Nepalese context is that people will say, 'Ah, that might be true there, but what about in my village?' There are places where it's much more homogeneous ethnically and where there are very different cultural standards [to the mainstream]. Nepal is a very heterogeneous place.

We're still at a preliminary state of analysis of results. It's a relatively better off part of the country, so there isn't the extreme deprivation of Dalits that you find elsewhere. None of that is to say that Dalit disadvantage doesn't continue and we can measure that. You can see in various different ways how Dalits are disadvantaged and how this is reproduced and we certainly want to write about that. One thing we have definitely shown is that there is a very high level of migration in Nepal generally and when people work together in the Gulf, caste distinctions simply disappear. As far as people in the Gulf are concerned, they are all Nepalis and the distinctions within Nepalis are not visible. That means they also disappear for the migrants themselves. So, there's virtually no caste discrimination or caste consciousness in the Gulf. There's a little bit of hill to plains feeling but otherwise caste distinctions simply disappear. When you ask people, 'Can you maintain those friendships across caste barriers on returning from working in the Gulf?' about 50% of people say they can't, because of the elders, or because they have to obey village customs. But it's interesting that the other 50% think that they can.

## **What do you think underpins the intermingling of religious politics and the way the middle class as such leads their life in Nepal?**

Religion doesn't enter politics in Nepal in quite the same explicit way that it does in India, but of course everything in Nepal is influenced by India and there are some politicians who are trying to unfold the Hindutva agenda in Nepal. It doesn't have the same legs that it does in India, because the Muslim population is much smaller, but, having said that, it is concentrated in certain places. There are several districts in the Terai bordering Bihar and UP where the Muslims are the largest single group, so in those places it has a kind of appeal. There's a myth that Nepal is a land of religious harmony and there's never been any communal violence. That's not true, but the level has been much lower and it has been much more occasional [than in India]. When the Rashtriya Prajatantra party got this shock surprise result in the proportional representation part of the election in 2013, this rocketed them up to become the fourth biggest party. That was ascribed to the pious Hindu middle class in cities like Kathmandu and Birganj using their second proportional vote on behalf of the RPP which was the party that was trying to unfold the Hindutva agenda. However, that success didn't repeat in the 2017 elections. Certainly there is a specifically middle class Hindu religiosity, but, unlike in India, it's not politicised.



The panel convenes to discuss 'Who are the middle class in South Asia' (L-R) Snigdha Punam, Edward McBride, Dr Lotte Hoek, Dr Ammara Maqsood and Professor David Gellner. Photo credit: Evelina Hepp, [E.H Photography](#).

### **In what ways does material culture of the memory of cultural heritage define the modern Nepali middle class? Are there factions and how do cultural memory or heritage define how the Nepali classes are divided?**

Ethnic politics has been a key part of Nepal's cultural and political scene since 1990. The Janajatis are equivalent to Scheduled Tribes [in India], but, in political size, they are more equivalent to the OBCs in North India. The Janajati groups tend to focus on particular symbols and the main symbolic thing is that each group has its own New Year celebration. The government has now recognised about 8 different New Year Days and there are probably another 10 that are observed unofficially. They've seized on some small festival which was not seen as particularly relevant in the past and they have built it up. There's a kind of activist grammar which involves having a big stage, having chief guests in which you try to get the president or the PM, and then you work down depending on the size of the meeting, location and the pull of the people, and then you have folk dancing, fiery political speeches. There's a kind of shared grammar and the Magars have to do this, the Gurungs have to do this, the Tamangs have to do this, and so on. There are also cultural heritage sites which are relevant for one group or the other. The government is wrestling with how to institutionalise multiculturalism.

### **Do you see parallels in other parts of South Asia?**

North India has similar sociological patterns to the movement in Nepal. There's an open border. Nepal is culturally closer to UP and Bihar, so you see parallels there. The way in North India each caste has its cultural hero [has a kind of parallel in Nepal]. The BJP has encouraged it, but other forces are also encouraging it. Collective identities that are being created through the invention of new festivals, new pilgrimage sites, new traditions – that's something in common with North India.

*Cover image: Two men sitting and talking in Durbar Square, Kathmandu. Photo credit: Jerome Bon, [Flickr](#), [CC BY 2.0](#).*

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