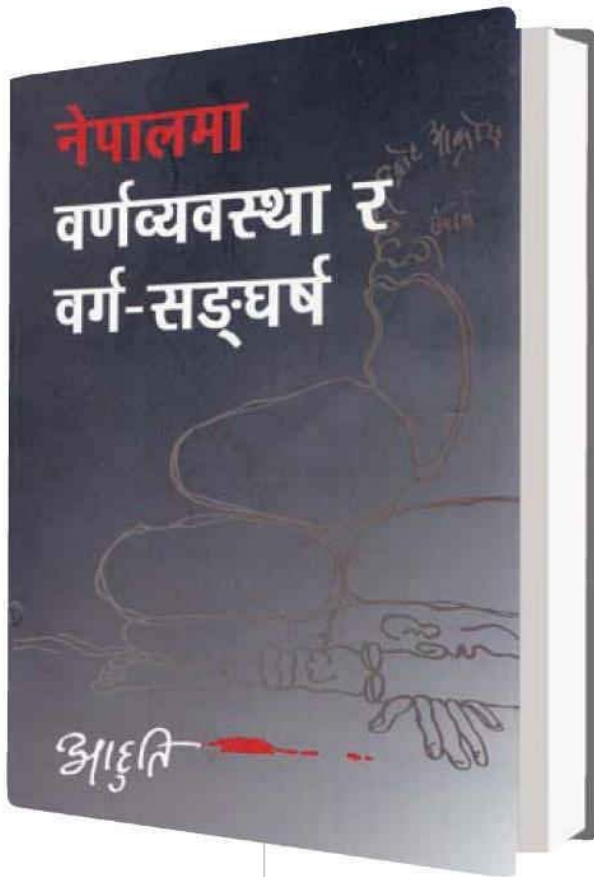


Agent of change

A comprehensive book on the Dalit movement



NEPALMA VARNA VYAVASTHAA
RA VARGA SANGHARSHA
AAHUTI
SAMATA FOUNDATION

UJJWAL PRASAI

A NUMBER of buzzwords surround the Dalit discourse in Nepal: untouchability, detachment, marginalisation, minority, empowerment, etc. While I come across these buzzwords, I am reminded of the *Post's* columnist Deepak Thapa's article *Bullshit Bingo*. With a tongue-in-cheek approach, Thapa tells us how NGO-people and politicians "throw trite nothings at us all the time" deriding the essence of these words into "bullshit." Borrowing from Thapa's idea, I also feel like compiling all these words to create a Dalit Bingo. This is to say that very little tangible achievement has been made on Dalit issues despite the many volumes that have been written on it. Though Nepali political leaders and intellectuals reiterate these buzzwords often, what stands out for them is "untouchability." They cannot or simply do not want to go beyond the problem of untouchability

whenever they deal with the Dalit-issue, limiting its gravity and sidelining it to the arena of culture.

The book *Nepalma Varna Vyavasthaa ra Varga Sangharsha* by Aahuti throws light on this limitation of existing discourse and moves further to trace the real problem, its history, and also explores ways to push the Dalit movement forward. This book deals with the Dalit problem in its entirety—exploring its socio-economic, structural and political dimensions. Aahuti, himself a Dalit activist and a Constituent Assembly member, starts with the etymology of the term Dalit. And explaining a long history of Dalit problems, he informs his readers how dense political connotations have come to be attached with the term. In doing so, he draws attention to the scope and gravity of the issue from the very beginning of his book.

"When we speak of Dalits, we speak of more than 4 million individuals (according to the 2001 census)," says Chaitanya Mishra in an introduction to this book. Understanding this issue only culturally is to reduce the economic, structural, and political problems of each individual who belongs to more than 800,000 Dalit families. A Dalit is a Dalit because from the day he is born, he is economically and politically alienated. Economically, many of these individuals are landless and jobless and some still bound to be the dependant labourers (Baalighare). Politically, they have scant representation in the local and central level government bodies. As they are rendered economically and politically powerless, they are devoid of education, and are also victimised by excruciating untouchability and social alienation.

Although the current constitution making process is fraught with pitfalls, it is high time that the issue of proportionate representation of Dalits at the decision-making level is ensured. Thus, political parties and the Dalit CA members, who represent their community in the CA, should work together. But as Aahuti explains in the book, 50 Dalit CA members, hailing from different political backgrounds, are unable to come together for a common cause. The political

questions always loom large and the real issue remains elusive. The conspicuous political factionalism among CA members and also among Dalit activists undercuts the likelihood of the Dalits being compensated for centuries of discrimination and of ensuring adequate political representation in the days to come. In the context of federalism, he clearly states that as Dalits do not have any fixed geographic region, every federal state should allocate Dalits in the decision making bodies on a proportional basis. This cannot be achieved through the existing status of the Dalit movement.

The movement against untouchability started in 1946 under the leadership of people like Sarbajeet Bishwokarma and Saharsha Nath Kapaali. After passing through different phases since, the movement has lifted itself up to a position where it can demand special prerogatives and compensation. However, the movement cannot gain momentum unless the non-Dalits, who head almost all the political parties, realise that the movement is not only necessary for the Dalit community as such; it is a movement to liberate over 20 percent of the Nepali population.

How can non-Dalits realise that the emancipation of Dalits and their economic empowerment also help accelerate the entire economy of the country, ultimately benefiting the entire population? Says Mishra, "We can include the simplified version of Aahuti's book in the school and college curriculum." This way we can make people aware and bring changes in the perception of individuals towards the Dalit community and the movement. Translating the book into other languages like Hindi and Maithili could help the Madheshi community which acutely needs this awareness as the Dalit issue is one of the most pressing in the community.

But *Nepalma Varna Vyavasthaa* is also a serious theoretical and academic work that offers scholars of Nepali society an in-depth discourse on this issue. The first robust academic work on Dalits, with a 50-page long critical introduction by arguably the most-renowned sociologist in the country, is a must read for all Nepalis.