

# **SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY OF DALITS IN KARNALI**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This study primarily aims at analyzing the socio-cultural identity of Karnali Dalits and its impact on society, with an additional motive to examine why Karnali Dalits tend to cover up their caste identity. To address the research need, structured interviews, one-to-one interviews, focus group discussion, participant observation and home visits were used. Major findings include the existence of rich socio-cultural identity of Dalits, who suffer from inferiority complex due to acute caste-based discrimination against them, and who are extremely excluded politically, socially and economically. The study, therefore, suggests that the state and other stakeholders formulate a strategy to empower Karnali Dalits, who often tend to conceal their caste identity due to prevailing severe discrimination against them. After the political changes in Nepal, there are many positive discriminatory laws and opportunities, which are still untapped by the Dalit communities in comparison to other ethnic and disadvantaged section of the communities. The comparative study of Dalit to provide concrete solution to develop positive discriminatory plans and programs which could provide some relief to the Dalits to some extent. The study reaffirms that Kamis are rich in iron work and mechanics, while Sarkis are craftpersons in leather work, with Damais being skilled in musician, dance and tailoring.**

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural identity, indigenous knowledge, untouchable, participant, ethnicity, Idea sharing, exclusion, disparities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Nepal has four major castes: Brahmins (bureaucrats and professional), Chatter security forces and professionals) Vaishyas (business people comprising all native ethnic groups), and Shudras (all dalits castes, which make up 23.35 percent of the total population in Karnali Nepal's . National Dalits Commission has enlisted 28 Dalit castes. A Dalit is actually born below the caste hierarchy system, which includes the four primary castes of Brahmins (priests), Chhetri (warriors and princess), Vaishya

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(farmers and artisans) and Shudra (tenant farmers or servants). Dalit are the de facto 'untouchables' in contemporary Nepal.

The caste system was reinforced in Nepal by King Jayasthiti Malla (1360- 95) about 700 years ago. The National Civil Code, 1854, (Muluki Ain) legalized the caste system and established it as the basis of social mobility. It laid out detailed codes for inter-caste behavior and specified punishments for their infringement. Such discriminatory legal system and hierarchical social structures, in course of time, formed as a rigid 'value system' and 'codes of social behavior and practices'. Members of these castes are considered to be the untouchables. Highly discriminated against, the untouchables remain outcastes, even in modern society. The history of the caste systems in Japan and India, and modern reformation movements must be discussed to fully grasp the current situation of the Dalits in Nepal and the Buraku in Japan.

The promulgation of a much anticipated new constitution of Nepal in late 2015 mostly ended a prolonged political transition, including the decade long Maoist insurgency. However, ethnicity remains a contentious area in both politics and economic action (Karki, 2010). Recent political groups, such as the Terai and Tharu movements, which are organized by various ethnic and regional groups including Dalits, Madheshis (people living in the southern Terai region of Nepal bordering India) and an indigenous group (Tharus) respectively have their roots in the issue of ethnic identity and failure of political elites to address it adequately.

Nepal still faces discontent regarding the newly promulgated constitution, especially from indigenous, Madhesis and Dalit communities. This issue of ethnic identity has brought them together for the promotion and institutionalization of their political, social, religious and cultural and economic rights (Lawoti, 2013). However, Dalits -- 13.1 percent of the Nepalese population (CBS, 2011) -- have failed to unite and clearly articulate their political socio cultural agenda. Dalits continue to remain one of the most economically marginalized, politically excluded and socio-culturally oppressed communities in Nepal (Dahal, 2002). Published statistics indicate that Dalits as a group are significantly below the national average in most development indicators such as poverty 48 percent, literacy 40 percent, chronic childhood malnutrition 60 percent, food shortage 85 percent, and life expectancy 48 years (CBS, 2011). Furthermore, the humiliating and

degrading practice of untouchability still exists despite the declaration of untouchability free country by the new constitution (Bhattachan, 2009). Dalits' low social status is attributed to their confinement to menial work and the exacting caste-based discrimination against them. There are strong causes to escape the constraints imposed by caste-based discrimination and it can be a factor for rural-to-urban migration. Similar to other developing countries, Nepal has significant migration from rural to urban areas (Chen, 1996). People migrate primarily for new economic opportunities such as jobs and business as well as social opportunities such as education and healthcare. A third reason for migration is to escape discriminatory social structures prevalent in rural districts by seeking a new identity in the relative anonymity of cities.

The caste system has further divided Dalits to divide them into many sub-castes. The use of the word 'Dalit', encouraged by great Dalit leader (Ambedkar, 1936). The development of a collective identity among all the 'outcaste' people, whatever is their sub-caste, ethnicity or religion. This is particularly relevant in the case of Dalits as the extent of caste-based discrimination in urban settings is less than in rural areas (Pandey, 2006). Because the Dalit community in Nepal tend to use migration as a way of seeking new identities. The ways in which they renegotiate, realign their socio-cultural activities during current political transition in Nepal.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The overall objective of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of the socio-cultural identity of Dalits in Karnali. The specific objectives are as follows:

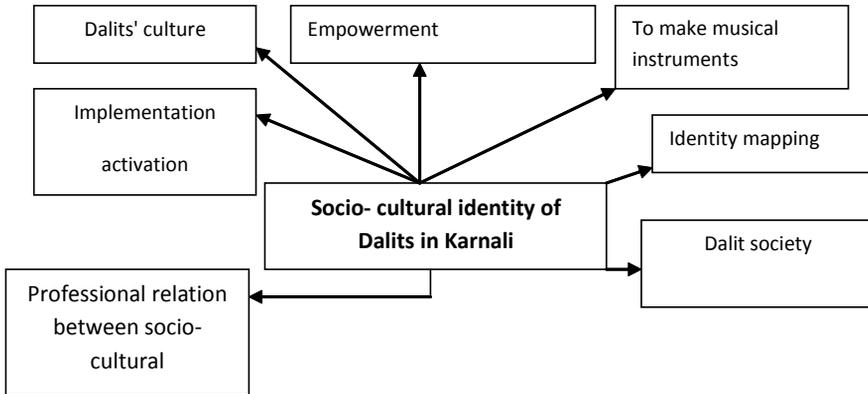
- i) to analyze the socio-cultural identity of Karnalis' Dalit and its impact on society, and
- ii) to analyze the caste identity problem and their current practice in hiding the identity.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The overall theoretical framework of the study mainly consists of the conceptualization of the problem, identification of issues, and specification of data collection tools, formulation of data and finally data presentation and analysis. Depending on the overall purpose of in-depth analysis of the Dalit community, a comparative approach has also been adopted to

explore the socio-cultural identity in Karnali where Jumla, Kalikot, Mugu, Humla and Dolpa were the fields of study for a comparative purpose. The findings obtained from the comparative study in the five districts had been assembled, processed and generalized regarding the revelation of the socio-cultural identity of Karnali Dalits.

**Figure 1:** Theoretical Framework of the Study



The socio-cultural identity of Dalits in Karnali had been examined according to above mentioned seven determinants.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study was based on previous Karnali zone seeking to explore the socio-cultural identity of Dalits for which some qualitative methods, namely structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussion, home visits and one-to-one interviews were used to generate data. With this methodology, the results on the socio-cultural identity of Dalits and its impact on the community's development were obtained. Researcher's presence at grassroots level in the geographical area of research was an opportunity to gather authentic information from the concerned community. The researcher found that field-based results appeared more important than the research process itself. Obtained data had been systemically analyzed, using proven tools.

Descriptive research designs the existing socio-cultural identity of Dalits in Karnali where, interview had been adopted to identity method was used for data collection. The specific questionnaires use designed and data

was collected through field based interview, home visits and focus group discussions.

### Study Area

Present day Karnali province covers 20.5 percent, of total of Nepal according to Government of Nepal, there are two largest and world famous lakes in Karnali i.e. Rara and Shyfocundow. The population of this province were fifteen lakhs forty thousand in 2018. The Karnali is the source of Nepalese language *Khas*. Similarly, *Lakes, Kali marsi Dhan* (brown rice) Apples, thousands of bio-diversity are situated in Karnali. The increase in population has been fuelled by an influx of internal migrants from neighboring Surkhet and Nepaljung, particularly for provincial capital.

The major castes living in Karnali were Brahmins, Thakuri, Chhetris, Lama and Dalits, almost all follow Hindu religions. A small proportion were Christian too. Historically, whilst settlement of the surrounding mountain forests of Karnali by Tibetan Lama (Tamang) took place as early as the 7th and 8th century, it was not until the mid eighteenth century that the Karnali, It was always backwarded for development and human index zone of province number six, during the Rana, Regime, which contributed towards Karnali flourishing as a market place and administrative hub. Although Karnali was considered a place of importance for trade and commerce, it was not until the political changes brought by the fall of the autocratic Rana, Regime, and introduction of democracy in 1951, that the development process accelerated. In fact, Karnali was not even mentioned as an urban centre in the 2070 census. (Adhikari, 2002)

Today, Dalits make up 23.35 percent of the total Karnali population, but their control over the resources of the country was far marginal i.e. less than .057 percent. Close to half of the Dalit population lives below the poverty line in Karnali zone, and even more 83.5 percent were illiterate. Among the Dalits, most of them were engaged in agricultural work but they were landless or nearly landless agricultural laborers.

Some of the features which highlight socio-cultural identify of Karnali Dalits were as follows:

- Almost 69.3 percent Dalits did not work for their traditional fields.
- A total of 31.4 percent Dalits were overtaken to their traditional occupations,

- About 21.7 percent people did not want to work in line with their indigenous skills,
- Almost 53.4 percent of the young Dalits people did not want to expose about their castes, and
- About 27.8 percent Dalit people were found to be continuing their traditional skills.

**Source:** Field survey, Jan to March 2018.

## **DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

Dalit identities are discussed under the parameters of caste, socio-cultural features and indigenous knowledge as follows:

### **Caste Identity of Dalits in Karnali**

This study focuses on the diverse ethnic group of Dalits in Karnali and elsewhere have endured social segregation, discrimination and oppression, including untouchability. In the past, discrimination against Dalits was so endemic that they were not allowed to be educated, serve in the army, were denied rights to property, had different footpaths and water wells, and were denied entry to temples (Ahuti, 2008).

(Ghimire, 2010) argues that it was a common belief in the past that food and water touched by Dalits should not be consumed by non-Dalit girls when their teeth begin to grow and boys should do the same when they reach ritual performing age, which is usually at very early age. Dalits have also suffered discrimination and subordination at the hands of Janajati (indigenous people). For example, Hofer (1976) investigated the relationship between Bishwkarma and Kami Dalits. Caste consists of social categories that are exclusive. No one belongs to more than one group and stratification that is still prevalent in Hindu societies all over the world where individuals inherit caste from their parents at birth. One of the principles on which the caste system is based on the “Hindu concept of pollution.” This divides society into four Varnas, namely Brahmins, Chhetris, Vaishya and Sudras. In the 14th century, King Jayasthiti Malla re-strengthened the ancient caste-based hierarchical society in the Kathmandu valley. The idea of reincarnation is inherent in Hinduism. As such, Hindus believe that good sacredness is a reward for people from the god who conducted themselves

well and performed good deeds in their previous life and bad sacredness is a punishment given to those who failed to conduct themselves well. (Hofer, 1976).

It is believed that being high caste is a reward associated with good sacredness whilst low caste is associated with bad sacredness. The Muluki Ain (Legal Code) of 1854, implemented by Jung Bahadur Rana, formally legalized the caste system by dividing Nepali society into a fourfold caste hierarchy. From a broader sociological viewpoint equivalence could be made between *Adivasi Janajati* and other caste groups prevalent in Nepal. The National Dalit Commission of Nepal identified 22 separate cultural groups among the Dalits in 2003. (Bhattachan, 2009) while the number of such groups reached to 29 in 2011 (Biswokarma, 2011).

The situation is further confused in Nepal by caste and ethnicity having been used interchangeably, mainly because of lack of clarity amongst academics and policy makers alike (Gray, 2012). The distinction between caste and ethnicity is unclear in many spheres including government documents such as the census. The Constituent Assembly's State Restructuring Committee reports by international organizations and academics (Khanal, 2009). However, the distinction between caste and ethnicity is important, as conflation of the two is considered a major obstacle to engaging Dalit agendas in the political arena (Folmar, 2013). Of the many sociological differences between caste and ethnicity, three in particular remain critical for Dalits. Firstly, people of different ethnic background remain more or less socially equal despite differences in culture, traditions and class status.

In Karnali and other western remote districts like Dailekh and Jajarkot, Damais were in the mid-east, Kamis in the far south and Sarkis in the center north. However, the mainly three Dalit castes were located in Karnali. In this study Dalits were considered as caste groups, located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They were more humiliated by the Nepalese socio-cultural homogenous system (in terms of the discrimination endured). The long tradition of caste-based stratification in society has been a major contributory factor in recent civil unrest and political division (Sharma, 2006). Castes have become competing socio-cultural groups, with hegemony and control of upper castes, who control province six, for example. This resulted in discrimination contributing to the onset of a brutal

civil war in Nepal leading to political fragility to the extent that Nepal was often spoken of as a failed state.

Karnali Dalits were closely involved with this so called ‘Maoist People’s War’, waged by the Maoist Communist Party against the state in Nepal between 1996 and 2006, struggled for their political identity. The Maoist insurgency affected the countryside as the insurgency was particularly severe in Karnali areas and had considerable support from many socio and indigenous knowledge skill. Particularly from Karnali Dalit communities, who suffered historic and cast based discrimination, political exclusion and economic deprivation (Adhikari, 2014).

At the end of the conflict, two rounds of elections to the constitutional assembly and deliberations on state restructuring brought the issue of ethnic identity to the forefront of political debates. Formation of a Constitutional Assembly through election to write a new constitution by people’s representatives was one of the key demands of the Maoists. Such delays were caused not only by the polity, but also the complex and heterogeneous composition of Nepalese Dalits, where the social category of Dalits in Nepal is multi-layered with divisions along the lines of religion, caste (within caste), region, class position and situation, gender, age and language. (Kharel, 2010).

As such, whilst the assumption is that there are common foundations of social categorization and identification both similarities and differences have featured in the construction of Dalit identity in Nepal. The major Dalit communities in Karnali were found to be Kami, Sarki and Damai community. The people of Kami community make different kinds of ornaments along with ritual utensils required in the temple for the conservation of their culture, tradition. The female ornaments such as *Fuli*, *Bhukali*, *Mangal sutra*, *Tilhari*, *Necklace*, *Bracklet*, *Tabala*, *Dhungri*, *Panas fuli*, *Kose Bulakhi*, *Necklace and musical instruments like Tabala*, *Thyali*, *Panchaj baja*, instruments. They also make agricultural tools like *Kuto*, *Bausho*, *Kadalo*, *Hata bauso*, *Farya Axe*, *Baso*, *Sword*, *Khukuri*, *Hasiya*, *Ghan* are made by the Bishwokarma, Sunar, Kami and Lohar community people. Accordingly, Sarki community people make shoes of various kinds and make design with their own skill. They had neither gone to any university to learn this skill nor taken any types of skill oriented courses. They had

inherited their ancestors' skill and modified it with a bit of modern touch. In order to make shoes, they estimate the sole size design and foot shape by their own applied skills. According to focus group discussion, the applied skills of making shoes were seen to be in practice regularly for the past five thousand years. Sarki people were also seen to be different in making *Pati*, *Pauwa*. Their contributions had brought a lot of changes in the Hilly Tarai, an Himalayan regions. These people had been supporting the improvement of monasteries in Karnali too. Similarly, Damai community also had their own unique culture, traditions and skills. Their typical musical instruments were include, *Sanai*, *Panchajbaja*, *Dhunkuri dance*, *Temko*, *Damaha*, *Raili*, *Hudke*, *Kailahi*, *Ghera*, *Masak*, *Papuri bean*, *Janti pachhadhuna*, *Beula Puja* and *Bauli puja*.

### **Socio-cultural Identity**

Socially and culturally, Dalits, with an exception of Bhramin and Chettri, share almost identical features with other Hindus of Nepal. The cultural similarities were partly because of both Dalits and non Dalit follow the Hindu religion and believe in common deities. Their common value had descended from either Astring and Dravidians or Indo Aryans, who arrived in Nepal either from India or from the Caucasus region in central Asia. (Ambedkar, 1936) Almost all Dalits of Karnali supposed them not being differ from Brahmins and Chhetri their god and deities.

Sapkota (2014) contends that racial identity emanates primarily from features that are external and visible such as skin colour. White and non white identity, and structure of the face Aryans and Mongol. Although much has changed, historically Europeans in general, and the British in particular, constructed a black ethnic group included those who were 'non-white' such as Asians, Africans and those of Caribbean descent (Yuen, 1997).

Whilst Dalits are treated like a different race from Aryans, they demonstrate mixed facial features and many of them share a similar biological and racial background with the higher castes of Brahmin and Chhetri making them almost indistinguishable, except for caste. The differences are socially constructed with religious backing, and this combination is translated into political and economic disparities. As political awareness

has increased amongst the Dalits, the experience of such disparities has played an important role in the construction of Dalit identity.

Dalits and non-Dalits both belong to the same religious background of Hinduism. They have had identical features like Brahmins and Chhetris. Dalits in the Karnali believed in the same "Gods" and "Goddesses" and so they had objected to being disallowed to enter the same temples or to touch drinking water meant for non-Dalits. There were a huge gap between Dalit and non Dalit communities, hierarchized by the Hindu religion. Kamis' spear and sword dance were a typical cultural identity. Culturally with an exception of Karnali Dalits, share almost identical features with other Hindu in Nepal. The cultural similarities were partly because Dalits and non-Dalit both follow the Hindu religion and believe in common deities.

### **Identity of Indigenous Knowledge**

Dalits in Karnali, as elsewhere, particularly in the different sub continent, experience social segregation and untouchability. This was also true amongst the participants involved in this research. This discrimination also leads to a shared cultural and social background, which is considered fundamental in the construction and expansion of ethnic identity. Karnali Dalits had different own skill, like; Kami Dalit making more farming, black smith and mechanic works, Sarki Dalit making leather, house construction, and Damai Dalit were very skillful on the dancing, tailoring and singing songs which were transferred qualities to their ancestors.

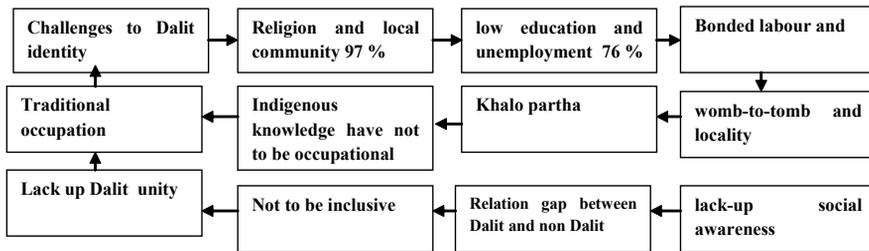
### **Challenges to Dalit Identity**

Although all Dalits in general were found to be similar excluded in national development stream. They were highly deprived and discriminated Dalit in Karnali, the remotest zone were extremely marginalized and poverty stricken. This situation were highly attributable to discrimination based on caste religion, gender, and livelihood issues (Dhal,2002). Dalits themselves had perceived their being Dalits differently despite the standard definition formulated by the state. These who advocate the term "Dalit" agreed that it is a common identity to recognize all oppressed caste- based communities so as to raise their agenda collectively. However, those who opt not to use the title "Dalit " becomes a symbol for the continuation of discrimination and reinforcement of oppression. In overall terms, the biggest challenges

for the Dalit identity are for the state and other stakeholders to explain to Dalits and the international human, society why Dalits are still extremely marginalized and deprived in political and socio-cultural spheres, sharply in contrast to constitutional guarantees of equal democratic and human rights.

Rural area in Nepal identity formation amongst the Dalits of Karnali takes place at multiple levels and scales. Also, despite suffering common caste based discrimination like Dalits in other parts of Nepal. Dalits living in Karnali were extremely poor and uneducated communities partly because of they did not necessarily share a distinct race, income, language, culture, cast untouchability discrimination. They were also divided by numerous characteristics including religion, caste, gender, language, region and low livelihood position and professional sector. Some members supported the use of the word, whilst others considered it to be patronizing and considered that it should not be used to indicate oppressed ethnic groups.

**Figure 2:** Structural Interlinkage of Challenges to Dalit identity in Karnali



Dalits should not self breed an inferiority complex and underestimate our own potentials zone and complain as one oppressed and discriminated group. The major issues to them are education so that they can learn from society to get organized to create our own identity. The same religion, womb-to-tomb local neighborhood, lack of education and employment, bonded labor, *Khalo* tradition, disunity and intra-caste discrimination among Dalits themselves, multisectoral exclusion and confinement to traditional occupations were some of the major challenges to Dalit identity in Karnali.

## CONCLUSION

Dalits in the Karnali region are found to be extremely marginalized in political, socio-cultural sectors. Hence the Kamis were skilled blacksmiths and Sarkis had owned the craft of leather goods. Similarly, Damais had possessed rich identity in music, dance and tailoring. Dalits were the producers of local goods and had their rituals and dress styles. Though the country had been restructured into provinces along the centre in Kathmandu where most of the administrative decisions and the strategic decision are made. Large number of population is still residing in the cities. In the case of Karnali, significant population were lives in villages which were ultra remote with no basic services. All the five districts i.e. Humla, Jumla, Mugu, Kalikot and Dolpa under the Karnali province were in previous zone and well known as the remotest part of the country. Dalit community were historically suffered and disadvantage in the name of cultural discrimination, caste based discrimination and economically deprived.

The communities living in the rural village of Karnali seemed self reliant on their traditional occupations and further they were also advanced in education and were quite aware to raise their voices about their rights. Caste-based discrimination was the strong factor in Karnali especially in the rural villages. Comparing to other parts of the country, Karnali is still in high rank for the caste and gender based discrimination so that there is incident of inhuman behaviors as Dalit lost their peaceful lives on the basis of untouchability issues by so call upper castes. Hence the state needs to come up with genuine strategies to empower the Dalits of Karnali.

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