

Geo-linguistic Route for Exploring the Role of English Language in Mitigating Tension between Dalits and Non-Dalits in Nepal

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Abstract

Social stratification in Nepal is based on the Hindu Chaturvarna system which has obnoxiously kept Dalits at the bottom of the hierarchy creating an inhumane discrimination against them. Such discriminatory practice has intensified the likelihood of tension between Dalits and non-dalits. Thus, this qualitative study exploring the role of English language in mitigating the tension between Dalits and non-dalits was carried out as a narrative inquiry. Analyzing the data collected from six Dalit students studying in Bachelor's level under different streams in the Kathmandu Valley through semi-structured in-depth interviews concluded that English language can play a positive role to mitigate the tension between Dalits and non-dalits.

Keywords: *Dalits, Chaturvarna System, Mitigating Tension, English Language, Geolinguistics*

Introduction

Cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnicity based diversities have become a reality in Nepal. In the anthropological landscape, the ethnicity-based diversity, which encompasses cultural and linguistic diversities, seem to have received a colossal attention in Nepalese academia, as the issues on them are more often dealt, studied and put on the academic discourses. By religion majority of people in Nepal follow Hinduism (Bhattachan, 2008p.18) out of which Chaturvarna System, a fourfold arrangement of caste system emerged stratifying the people into four different hierarchical strata namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras- Brahmins being at the top of the hierarchy and Sudras at the bottom (Kisan,2005; Bhattachan,2008; Aahuti,2019).

Unlike other ethnic communities, the Sudras, also known as Dalits, were made untouchables and expected to serve the people of upper layers in the hierarchy. Most of the times, this was done by force of Brahminical order of the Hindu Society (Rajawat, 2005) and the Dalits had to undergo an abysmal history of

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discrimination since around 35 hundred years back when the Verna System, which compelled Dalits to be the most subalternized and dehumanized humans of the planet, is supposed to have been institutionalized in the then Indian Subcontinent (Aahuti, 2019 p.59). Even the prominent Hindu scriptures like Rig-Veda, Upanishads, Manusmriti and Mahabharata gave a degraded picture of Shudras (Muthaiah, 2004 p.385). Moreover, perpetual persecution of untouchables emerged from Manusmriti that presented a model for constitutional and judicial social systems which is extremely obnoxious on the Shudras. Dalits are still untouchables and untouchability is a unique phenomenon among Hindus unknown to humanity in other parts of the world. It is not found in any other society- primitive, ancient or modern (Ambedkar, 1948, p.38). Even in the contemporary literature, the term 'Dalit' attributes to stigmatized identities for recognition that deals with a social status of a person in a society Hindu society. (Massey, 1995, p.15).

Even more fact, that is surprising, is that Dalits have been experiencing this inhumane discrimination even by those non-Dalits who do not believe in and follow Hinduism. Bhattachan (2008, p.56), taking reference of a couple of studies, reveal that Dalits still suffer from at least 205 forms of caste-based discrimination in different parts of country. In the same line, Madsen (2017) reveals that since 1990, though the caste-based discriminatory practices have been declared illegal and punishable by law, it still forms an essential part of the socio-cultural landscape in Nepal.

Dalits feel like an alien even in the cultural and linguistic communities they are believed to have belonged to as the non-Dalits impose some injunctions on them not to follow such cultural practices resulting a kind of tension in the society (Kisan, 2005). Dalits are nnot likely to bear such ill treatments any more and are trying to be responsive promptly and vividly to such ill-treatments made against them in the recent years exhibiting a higher probability of social conflict between Dalits and non-Dalits.

Dalits seem to have been poor linguistically. They do not have their separate mother tongues. They speak the languages of the communities near where they dwell or the languages they speak are highly influenced by such languages resulting them not to have acquired the standard form of any languages. As for instance, the Dalits of Kathmandu Valley speak Newari language, the Dalits of

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Mithilanchal speak Maithili language, those living near the Gurung community speak the Gurung language and so do they in other respective places.

Obviously, language is the main tool which helps harmonize and regulate the human communities as it symbolizes power and no one accumulates power without acquiring the relation to that language (Bourdieu, 1977). Production and reproduction of relations of power are legitimized through ideologies of language. Basically, people speaking dominant languages in the society hold power and enjoy status. Thus, language can be a strong variable to create dispute as well as maintain harmony in a society.

Diversity in Nepal co-exists even in the form of language where Nepali is the main dominant language. However, English, an international dominant language emerging as a global lingua franca (Kachru, 1992), is expanding its horizon even in Nepal. Specifically, English is getting higher prominence in the field of education where it is believed to the learners' social, cultural and economic capital providing for a promising future (Norton, 2015).

In this context, this study was carried out from the perspective of Geolinguistics, a theoretical understanding to view the vital importance of language in terms of personal and national identity, languages in contact and conflict, languages in an increasingly globalized economy, bilingual education and language pedagogy in general, and much more (Kitabayashi, 2018).

Dalits are the most subalternized and dehumanized people. They are treated in an inhuman way by the so-called upper class people and are unlikely to tolerate such ill-practices any more. This on-the-ground reality has increased the likelihood of conflict between Dalits and non-dalits. Moreover, Dalits belong to heterogeneous linguistic communities. Since they lack a common and particular mother tongue, the languages they speak are affected by the languages that the non- Dalits speak in the surrounding. Taking this argument as a point of reference, this study has attempted to explore the role of world-dominant language English to mitigate the likelihood of tension between Dalits and non-dalits in Nepal.

It is expected that the study will be useful and beneficial to the government, policymakers, academicians, educationists, social scientists, Dalit students and activists, politicians, and more importantly the English language teachers. Besides, this study might benefit the prospective researchers to carry out further researches in this field.

Methodology

Since the issues raised in this study deal with the subjective elements to knowledge and the study aimed at exploring and understanding the subjective world (Cohen et al., 2010) of Dalit students' experiences, ideas, opinions etc., this qualitative study is based on narrative inquiry design which deployed the information collected from the respondents in terms of their lives, experiences, views, and stories (Riessman, 2008). Moreover, the study deployed transformative world view (Mertens, 2010) as it fits the marginalized individuals or issues of power and social justice, discriminations, and oppression that needed to be addressed (Creswell, 2014).

Desk reviews of secondary data were accomplished in the library for this study which was enriched with the primary data obtained from the respondents. The population of the study comprised of Bachelor level Dalit students studying in the different campuses under Tribhubvan University in the Kathmandu valley. Six students from six different districts studying in Bachelor first year under Education, Humanities and Management streams were purposively selected and their responses were obtained through semi-structured interview conducted on physical and virtual mode. Interview guidelines were prepared prior to the field work.

Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Subsequently, with thematic coding (Charmaz, 2006), the data were condensed and presented thematically. To ensure consistency across the codes, I employed the strategies like thorough review and description of data, triangulation, addressing bias and peer debriefing (Peoples, 2020). Moreover, to ensure the respondents' privacy and confidentiality of data, the respondents and the institutions they belong to, have been pseudonymized.

Results

As the academic discourse on the linguistic issues of Dalits has not been focused much, studies in this area seem to have been sporadic. So, I grew interested in this area and carried out this study from the perspective of geolinguistics, a branch of linguistics that deals with language as a means of contact and conflict and concerns with doing objective-oriented studies on real-life language issues (Kitabayashi, 2018).

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For this study, I purposively selected six Dalit students studying at Bachelor first year at the different campuses in the Kathmandu valley as the respondents. They belonged to the streams of Education, Humanities and Management. I took their interviews so as to elicit their ideas on the likelihood of conflict between Dalits and non-dalits and the role of world-dominant language English to mitigate this conflict.

Ramita Bishwokarma aged 18, from Panauti Municipality in Kavre district, studies in B.Ed. first year at a campus in Bhaktapur district. She lives in a community where majority of the households belong to the Brahmins and Kshetries. She has experienced an extreme level of discrimination and inhumane practices not only in her hometown in Kavre but also in Kathmandu. She reveals that ‘there are visible and invisible tensions between Dalits and non-Dalits which are likely to be more intensified in the days to come because non-dalits do not stop oppressing us and we can’t bear their oppression any more...*aba ta kati sahera basne ho ra sir...bolnu paryo ni sir aba ta (How long should we endure this oppression? It’s the time we speak!)*’. She added, ‘How long can we wait at the tap? How long can we be abused and offended for touching their utensils that we have made for them? Why should we be restricted from using the public properties like tap, well and the like that we have made? We should not bear it anymore and whenever we respond means apparently conflict. Non-dalits want to keep on abusing, oppressing and exploiting us and we do not want it anymore. Finally, though not good, conflict becomes inevitable and unavoidable. To avoid this conflict, non- Dalits should change their attitude and mentality. If they do, we should try from our side. To mitigate the conflict, Dalits need to engage themselves in social work and activities. They should hold the social post and position so as to carry out social activities through which they can earn regards from non-Dalits. Dalits should get prepared for this through education, decent and civilized use of language, develop argumentative skill so that the issues could be addressed logically and develop friendly and cordial relationship with non-Dalits’.

‘English language can play a significant role in this regard. When we speak English language, they think that we are educated person and they don’t think of abusing/ insulting us. Obviously, even if unwillingly, they regard us for being an educated person...*yo ta padhe lekheko manxe ho yeslai hepnu hunna typeko pani aaula ni ta sir (He is an educated person and we should not abuse him-, might they think so)*. Gradually, they will stop insulting, exploiting and oppressing us,

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and obviously, the tension between us will be reduced as our decent and humanized identity will be constructed’.

Suraj Pariyar, aged 17, is from Rainas Municipality in Lamjung district. He is also a B.Ed. first year student at one of the campuses in Kathmandu. He opines ‘Dalits are dominated and they feel themselves to be inferior to others as they lack their own language, culture and tradition. Since Nepali is our official language, no doubt, it should be preserved and promote. However, English language can play an important role to mitigate the tension between Dalits and non- dalits. English language will not be the possession of a particular community and everybody will have equal ownership on it. So, linguistic tension could be reduced if English is used widely and intensively in our country.’

Milan Nepali, aged 19, is from Purkot, Tanahu. He studies in B.A. first year. He also notices some visible and invisible tensions between Dalits and non-dalits. He says that English language can help Dalits get connected to international communities and raise their voices in international forums and conventions through which oppression against them can be reduced and the tension could be mitigated. He says ‘*...hamro pahichanlai kami, sarki, damai aadi ko rupma matra jogairakhne hoina. Aba hamile bishwobhar boline samparka bhasa angreji sikam; shikshit banera gyan badham; antar-rashtriya samudaya sanga hamro samparka sthapana garam; vibhinna samajik tatha rajnitik padko lagi aaphulai योग्या बनम; hamro samudayalai mathi utham ra hamro pahichanko punarnirman gardai apamanrahit manav jiban jiuna sakaun*’ (let’s not preserve our identity only as blacksmith, cobbler, tailor and the like. Let’s learn English language, the world lingua-franca, get educated, enrich our knowledge and get connected with international communities, empower ourselves, deserve different socio-political posts and positions, uplift our dehumanized community, reconstruct our identity and live a stigma-free humanized human life).

This remarks of Milan put the accent on the reconstruction of Dalits’ identity as he doesn’t entertain the present derogatory identities as blacksmith, cobbler, tailor and so on. In order to reconstruct their identity they need to empower themselves through education- a strong tool to expand the horizon of their knowledge- which makes them eligible to hold socio-political power and positions and upgrade their social status. For this purpose, they need to establish connection with international communities as well and English language can be quite instrumental to achieve all these aspirations of Dalits.

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Sonu Pariyar is from Siranchok Rural Municipality, Gorkha. She is aged 18 and studies in B.A. first year. Like other respondents, she also points out the importance of English language to get rid of the discrimination made against them and thereby mitigating the likelihood of conflict between Dalits and non-dalits. She says, '*English ramro sanga janyo vane ta hamilai kasaile pani hepna sakdaina ni...English bhaneko ta power ho ni... (if we have good command over English language, none can dominate us as English symbolizes power...)*).

Another respondent of the study was Gita Bishwokarma, aged 21 from Jaljala Rural Municipality, Parvat. She studies in BBS first year. She also pointed out the importance of English language in mitigating the tension between Dalits and Non-dalits. She argues that English language helps to carry out research studies which digs out facts, induces logical debates and discourses thereby helps to realize how Verna system was originated; offering a ground to mitigate the gap between Dalits and non- Dalits.

Niraj Bishwokarma aged 20, from Tarakeshwor Municipality, Kathmandu also studies in BBS first year. Even his ideas align with that of other respondents of the study. He presents a linguistic cause to conflict which is similar to Ramita's. For him conflict between Dalits and non-Dalits occurs because of language as well. In Nepali language, words to address the people ranges from *Ta* (non-honorific), *Timi* (neutral), *Tapai* (honorific) to *Hajur* (highly honorific). Dalits use the term *Tapai* and *Hajur* to non-Dalits; conversely they are called *Ta* and *Timi* by others. This discrimination is also a cause to conflict.

Contrary to Nepali language, in English, basically, only the word '*You*' is used to address the people which does not create discrimination as such. Thus, English language can be supportive to mitigate the tension between Dalits and non-Dalits.

The information elicited from the respondents exhibits that Dalits are undergoing an extreme level of discrimination by non-dalits and there are visible or invisible conflicts between Dalits and non-dalits. Language not only creates conflict but also maintains harmony in the society.

Discussion

This study dealt with three main issues; Dalits in the eyes of non-dalits, likelihood of tension between Dalits and non-dalits, and role of English language in mitigating the tension between Dalits and non-dalits. This study particularly

aimed to explore the broader understanding of Dalit students regarding these issues.

The major findings of the study include: Dalits have derogatory status and dehumanized identity in the eyes of non-dalits. They are discriminated, dominated, and exploited by the non-dalits which is the main cause of conflict between them. English language can be used as a means to mitigate this tension.

Dalits in the eyes of non- dalits: The finding of the study, regarding Dalits in the eyes of non-dalits, depicts a derogatory and dehumanized picture of Dalits which is aligned with (Ambedkar, 1948) who opines that untouchability is a unique phenomenon of the Hindu community unknown to humanity in other parts of the world. Similarly, the finding of this study can be accentuated with the light of Aahuti (2019) who pointed out that Dalits came across an abysmal history of discrimination since around thirty five hundred years back. Consistent to this finding, Bhattachan, (2008) evidenced that Dalits suffer 205 forms of caste-based discrimination even today. These arguments were alluded by almost all the respondents of this study. They were found to be extremely dissatisfied with the lenses non-dalits hold to view them. These issues correlate with geolinguistic studies which deal with languages in relation to culture, power, identity and social structure (Kitabayashi, 2018).

Information collected for this study evidences such perception of Non-dalits about dalits. Ramita, a respondent of the study *says...hamilai ta manxe nai ho jasto gardainan, kukurle xoyeko khana chai hune , hamile xoyeko chai khana nahune...* (Non- dalits do not regard us as a human being. Food touched by a dog is pure and edible to them but not that of what we have done). Muthaiah, (2004 p.385) also highlights this derogatory picture of Dalits in the eyes of Non- dalits.

However, it does not seem to be fair to keep all the non-dalits in the same basket. Some of the non-dalits, basically the educated and new generation, have started to view Dalits with different lenses. They have started feeling the pains and sufferings of Dalits and act out positively. Suraj, another respondent of the study *says ...achelka padhe lekheka shixitharule ta ali tyasto gardainan...* (Educated non-dalits in the recent years do not ill-treat us as such). This fact shows that the derogatory picture of Dalits is getting changed.

Likelihood of tension between Dalits and non-dalits: There are visible and invisible tensions between Dalits and non-Dalits and it's likely to be more

intensified in the days to come because non-Dalits have not stopped oppressing Dalits and they can't bear such oppression any more. Dalits are trying to use their rights ensured by the law to fight against different forms of caste based caste-based discriminations (Government of Nepal, 2011) but, many of the non-dalits still want to retain it. They think that Dalits are meant to serve them but Dalits have started to deny this notion strongly in a unified way (Rajawat, 2005) resulting confrontations in different places. The evidences obtained from the respondents also indexes that Dalits are mentally prepared for on-the-spot responses whenever and wherever they are ill- treated; meaning conflict seems to be inevitable and unavoidable.

Ramita one of the respondents of the study says '*...hamile banayeko mandirma hami nai jana napaune...uniharule 'Ta' vane pani hune hamile 'Hajur' bhannu parne...uniharule je gare pani hamile sahanu parne...kina sahane..aba hami pani ek vayera ladnu parxa...*' (*Why can't we get into the temple that we have made? Why should we use honorific language to them if non-honorific is used for us? We should not bear it anymore and fight against this discrimination a unified way*). This remark aligns with Aahuti (2019) and Kisan (2005) who point out the need of struggle to fight against such inhumane practices.

Role of English language in mitigating this tension: The findings of the study show that the dominant language in the society can be used as a means to exercise power. In this regard, the respondents of the study pointed out that English language can play an important role in mitigating the tension between Dalits and non-Dalits. They opine that language holds power and power is exercised through language. Since English language has become the only one global lingua-franca, a great deal of power can be exercised through it in the world arena. English has become the most prominent language in the field of science and technology, media and communication, research and education, trade and business, health and medical studies and so on. Having good command over language means accessing more opportunities, empowerment, accessing international platforms and interactions, accessing more resources for research studies and fact findings and many more. This understanding of the respondents is aligned with Norton (2015).

Thus, if Dalits develop good command over English language, they can grab different opportunities and empower themselves. They can enhance the level of their education, carry out researches and studies, find out the facts about their issues, develop logical and argumentative skills and prove that they are no more

ignorant. Then Non- Dalits do not dare abuse and insult them resulting out in mitigation of tension between them. This understanding can be eluded by the remarks of one of the respondents, Milan. For him English language might play a significant role in mitigating the tension. When we speak English language, they think that we are educated person and they don't think of abusing/ insulting us. Obviously, even if unwillingly, they regard us for being an educated person. '*... yo ta padhe lekheko manxe ho yeslai hepnu hunna ...*' (*he should not be dominated since he is an educated person*). Gradually, they will stop insulting; exploiting and oppressing us, and obviously, the tension between us will be reduced. Bordieu (1977) also highlights this phenomenon of language.

Sonu, another respondent of the study, also points out that English language can help for their empowerment through education, employment opportunities and hike the level of their understanding. Whenever they are empowered, Non- dalits will respect them and there will be less chance of conflict. Moreover, they will not need to struggle to exercise their rights ensured by the constitution and law. She says '*...hami afai saxam bhayau vane kasle rokna, hepna sakxa ra hamilai..hamile English janyau vane hamra kura haru bideshiharulai pani sunauna sakxau, uniharule pani hamilai sahayog garna sakxan...*' (*If we are empowered, nobody can abuse us and stop us to public spaces. If we speak English we can communicate with international communities and they might help us*). This idea seems to have been aligned with Kachru (1992). This understanding of Sonu could be interpreted as respect and access to Dalits means no need to struggle and thereby mitigation of tension. Similar type of understanding is found to have broached by Norton, (2015) who opines that English seems to be more beneficial in the contemporary world situation as it enhances the peoples' social, cultural and economic capital providing for a promising future.

Another finding of the study illustrated that English language is likely to play the pivotal role to empower and reconstruct identity of Dalits. Most of them pointed out that English language are equipped with power. This claim is aligned with Bruns (1984). English language is a symbol of scholarship and speaking English means, in a way, revealing that you are educated and you deserve a status in the society. It offers the opportunity to get global exposure to education, science and technology, media and communication and more importantly, to raise the voice of subalterns in the global arena. Even Norton (2015) evidenced the similar type of arguments regarding the increasing influence of English language. Moreover, transformation takes place through language i.e. Dalits' identity can be

transformed through English language. Even Conde (1995) highlighted the power of language indicating that language has power to create, transform, destroy and bring about a new world. It's true even in the eyes of Hassen (2016) who perceives language as a feasible option in the process of identity reconstruction.

Dalit students have pointed out the role of English language even from global perspective. Their eagerness to raise their voice among the global community is reflected in their responses. This perspective agrees with Weyreter & Viebrok (2014) and Kachru (1992) as the role of English language has become so instrumental in the process of identity making for English now offers multicultural identities. Transformation of Dalits' identity means, obviously, the construction of harmonious society.

For them, English language has power (Bordieu, 1977) to struggle against discrimination, which could be instrumental to reconstruct their identity. Meanwhile, Dalits pursue to enhance their social, economic and cultural capitals for their promising future in the contemporary world through English language (Wardhaugh, 2002; Norton, 2015). Even for academic excellence, they have realized the pivotal role of English language as it is being embraced as an important aspect of educational reforms in the Developing countries like Nepal (Coleman, 2011).

All these issues discussed above are closely associated with geo-linguistics which concerns with a number of on-the-ground language issues like growth of English language as a world language, the vital importance of language in terms of personal and national identity, language in increasingly globalized economy, language in contact and conflict, and so on (Kitabayashi, 2018).

Conclusion

Dalits are striving to be empowered and live a prestigious life in the society but non-Dalits seem to be reluctant to let them do so. However, in the recent years, many of the educated Non-dalits have been advocating and joined hands together for Dalit-rights and status. Despite this fact, conflict between Dalits and Non-dalits is more likely to be intensified in the days to come and it ought to be mitigated. Apart from other various factors, language through which power is exercised in the society can play an important role to mitigate this tension. Dominant languages like English can contribute a lot to empower the subaltern people like Dalits offering them different opportunities and bringing them out to

the global community from their narrow confinements. English language is thought to be playing contributory role in mitigating the tension between Dalits and Non-dalits in the context of Nepal. Dalits seem to have been tempted to learn English language so as to empower themselves and live a life with a status.

However, this study was carried out among the university Dalit students belonging to Hill Dalit communities and it's worth studying about these issues even among the school students, Madhesi Dalit students and Dalit professionals associated with various professions.

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