

Perception of dalits who entered civil service through reservation system in Nepal

Pritha Paudyal

pritha.paudyal@nasc.org.np

Abstract

Historically, Dalits have been one of the most marginalized caste groups in Nepal. Always pushed to the fringes of society, deprived of opportunities to make their way out of caste-based hierarchy, Dalits have always been among the lower rungs of society. To eliminate such discriminations and ensure their adequate representation at least in civil service, the concept of reservation, or quota-based hiring was introduced. This exploratory study attempts to understand how Dalits who have entered the civil service through the reservation system perceive themselves as civil servants.

As per the findings of this study, Dalits who have entered the government through reservation system feel isolated and perceive others see them as incapable and not trustworthy. They also feel there exists an indirect discrimination in society which is something that they have experienced all their life. The study confirmed that Dalits who enter the government civil service through reservation system aspire to receive more encouragement at work, as they perceive such thrust will nurture confidence and result in better performance, but their caste status seems to have created problems to realize their aspiration into reality.

Keywords: Civil service, Dalits, perception, reservation system, discrimination

Introduction

The Civil Service Act, 1993 A.D., of Nepal has provisioned reservation system to make civil service inclusive. Reservation, or quota-based hiring in other words, is a form of affirmative action designed to improve the participation of under-represented communities defined primarily by gender, caste, backwardness and disability (Paudel, 2013). Nepal has legally recognized 59 indigenous

nationalities, referred to as Adivasi Janajati. Madhesis are the ethnic groups of the Terai region of Nepal. According to the National Dalit Commission, *Dalits* are defined as “those communities who, by virtue of atrocities of caste-based discrimination and untouchability, are most backward in social, economic, educational, political and religious fields, and are deprived of human dignity and social justice” (cited in DWO, 2018). “Dalits are considered as not only below the Hindu high castes but also below the non-caste, non-Hindu groups such as indigenous peoples” (BK, 2013, p.9).

The civil service of Nepal consists of nine different classes of civil servants which are listed here in ascending order: non-gazetted fifth class, non-gazetted fourth class, non-gazetted third class, non-gazetted second class, non-gazetted first class, gazetted third class, gazetted second class, gazetted first and gazetted special. According to the Civil Service Act 1993, vacancies in civil service are filled by two methods, internal promotion and open competition. In ‘open completion category’ for each class, 45 percent of the vacant posts are allocated for various sub-categories of the reserved groups. The breakdown for the reserved groups is: 33 percent for women, 27 percent for Adiwasi/Janjati, 22 percent for Madhesi, nine percent for Dalits, five percent for the Disabled (people with disabilities), and four percent for Backward Area. Backward area here refers to Achham, Kalikot, Jajarkot, Jumla, Dolpa, Bajhang, Bajura, Mugu and Humla districts of Nepal.

The Public Service Commission (PSC) recruits officers for the gazetted and non-gazetted classes. PSC calls for the applications from the interested eligible candidates for each class except for the special class. PSC conducts competitive examination consisting of multiple papers and interview as the final method of selection.

The reservation system has received mixed responses since its inception. It has been praised for diminishing the gap between the well-represented and under-represented (Paudel, 2013). On the other hand, however, it has been criticized for discouraging a merit based system (Paudel, 2013). Furthermore, it has already been 15 years since the Interim Constitution and six years since the new Constitution of Nepal, but the concept of reservation and its objectives and the idea of affirmative action appear to be an area of investigation and requires more explanation (Ghimire, 2021).

For the reserved group, the Civil Service Act 1993 targets women, Adiwasi/Janajati, Madhesi, and Dalit as people who are backward economically and socially. But Paudel (2013) shares that resistance of elites has remained as a continuous challenge and constant threat to the progress.

While there has always been a discussion on whether or not to continue reservation system, understanding the experiences of those who have entered the civil service through quota is necessary. According to Raju Nepali, a district level Dalit community leader of Communist party, “Caste-based prejudices cannot be removed but are being reproduced in different shapes and forms and will continue until people know about the caste system”. This is because she has experienced a different form of untouchability which cannot be observed directly; and, she has termed it as “civilised untouchability”.

Civil servants are involved in implementing various legal provisions, acts, policies, regulations but are also involved in drafting the law. But the bureaucrats belonging to upper castes at higher government posts are found favoring individuals from their caste for recruitment or promotion (ILO, 2005). Education is considered as one of the major tools for social change and ending

discrimination. Today, Nepali civil service employees are hired on the merit basis. Understanding the situation within civil service in the present context through the eyes of civil servants from Dalit community is crucial so that further studies could be carried out to find out ways for bringing about social changes for ending discrimination in the societies within the country.

The primary essence of this paper is to understand how Dalits perceive themselves as civil servants who have entered the service through the reservation system. The study explores the Dalits' motive behind entering the civil service; attempts to understand the importance of reservation system for Dalits and to understand if they still perceive discrimination within their offices.

Research design

This study is an exploratory research to understand the experiences of Dalits in civil service who entered the job through reservation system. From the beginning of this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been adopted. "IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to examining how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2013, p.1). For this study, IPA by Smith et. al. (2013) was followed.

Sampling method and sample size

A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was used. Purposive sampling was used whereby participants were selected based on their entry in the civil service of Nepal through the Dalit quota system. Then, snowball sampling was used in which one participant recommended another possible participant that he or she knew.

A minimum of two years of experience in civil service was set as one of the criteria for the sample so as to ensure that the participants had adequately understood their working environment. Four Dalit individuals were interviewed who had entered the civil service through reservation system.

Data collection

Since IPA was used for the data collection, firstly, a checklist of questions was constructed for semi-structured in-depth interviews. Open and expansive questions were prepared for the interview to encourage the participants to express their stories, thoughts and feelings.

Consent for conducting interview was obtained from the participants and appointment was taken for one-to-one interview with each participant in the place and time they preferred. The first round of interview lasted for about 55 to 80 minutes. The interviews were recorded, and notes were also taken during the interview. A follow-up telephone interview was also conducted for ensuring what they meant was understood correctly.

Data analysis

IPA was used in data analysis, where efforts were made to find essence of the participants' lived working experiences in the civil service while entering it through the Dalit quota (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013). For ethical consideration, pseudo names were used in the paper. According to Smith et. al. (2009), one of the major theoretical axes of IPA is making sense of what is happening to them. An inductive approach was used for analysis of the data. The data were coded to identify the emergent themes. Then, firstly, the transcripts from the interviews were read and notes were

prepared on excel sheets along with exploratory and descriptive comments for each interviewee. From the notes and comments, the most important and common statements were separated. Common themes were identified from those statements that were crucial for the participants. After identifying the themes, connections across those themes were searched. Finally, the first level interpretation was done, making participant's social comparisons (there are three levels of interpretation among which the third one is the micro textual analysis).

Van Manen (1997) mentions that theme is the means to get at the notion and describe its contents. Themes emerged here are the tools used for understanding the perception of Dalits towards civil service through their experiences. Conclusion derived here applies only to "that aspect of reality that was perceived by all participants" (Moreno, 2002, p. 1765). Following a brief profile of the four participants (cases), a thematic analysis of interview data is presented.

Findings: The four cases

Case one

Twenty-eight-year-old Mahima has been working as an Accounts Officer at Tikapur Municipality Executive Office in Province No. 7 since March 22, 2019. She passed the PSC examination and entered the civil service on December 02, 2016, as a Nayab Subba, a non-gazetted class I officer. After a year, she passed the PSC examination for the gazetted class III officer.

Born to a family of six elder sisters and a younger brother, Mahima was only around 15 years old when her father got paralyzed; and thereafter, the family had to face financial difficulties. For years, her family struggled under acute financial hardships. It was only after her elder sister got a job that the economic condition in her family slowly began to get better.

The story of how Mahima got into a job in the civil service goes like this: Before joining the civil service, Mahima worked as a Project Coordinator in a Non-government Organization at Kailali, Province 7. Once she had to invite some government officers for an interaction program funded by an International Non-government Organization. It was a program for women who were victims of domestic violence. But instead of understanding the importance of the program, the officers asked the amount of money they would receive for attending the program as speakers. She realized that there is a need of sincere people in the civil service who are committed to working for the needy people and for uplifting backward society. With that intention, she decided to leave her job and become a civil servant to work for the benefit of society.

But on the job, Mahima has been a subject to caste-based discrimination. Once a couple of Dalit service seekers came to her office and said, "We are very relieved to see you in the office. We are able to put forward our problems without any hesitation. You understand our issues. But we feel awkward going to the room of the current boss (Hakim) of the office who is a non-Dalit. We do not feel that he will understand our sufferings and emotions."

She has also often felt like she is looked down upon and treated as an incapable officer by her supervisor. Once the head of the municipality asked her a question related to the accounts. She answered him well but he did not believe in her answer. Then he went to a junior non-Dalit staff and confirmed it from him; and he finally got convinced.

“But Dalits are equally competent and capable as non-Dalits in the civil service but the problem is that Dalits have low confidence and self-esteem”, she added. She further shares that Dalits constitute only one percent of the total civil servants. Hence the reservation system should be continued until the representation of Dalits in the civil service becomes 13 percent because they constitute 13 percent of the total population in the country. Reservation system is generally criticized considering that only members of economically well-off families have entered the civil service through quota system. But Mahima denies it by asking for evidences which can prove such statements. She said, “I belong to a family which has undergone financial difficulties and is now recovering. Please show me the research papers which reveal that only economically well-off Dalits have entered the civil service through quota system.”

Case two

Thirty-year-old Anup is the Chief Administration Officer at Falgunanda Rural Municipality Office in Province No. 1. He joined the Government of Nepal civil service as a Kharidar, non-gazetted class II officer, on February 11, 2013.

He was born in Hilihang Rural Municipality, ward 2, in a family that consisted of a younger brother, an elder sister and parents. His parents, who were farmers, had worked very hard in educating him. For higher schooling, he came to the district headquarter, Phidim. There he saw many people preparing for the PSC examination. People greeted government officers with “Namaskar”, which is a polite form of ‘hello’. He also saw them as people who earned money because they had good living standard.

One day, the news came that Anup had won a poetry competition; and this news drew the attention of a political party’s district committee member. The member was also a Dalit but unknown to Anup. That member searched for Anup and praised his abilities and encouraged him to apply for the PSC examinations. He said, “Had there been no reservation system I would not have thought of applying for the job”. He succeeded in getting the job in his first attempt. The success in his first attempt build up his confidence further which made him determined to apply for the gazetted class III officer. Hence immediately after the completion of his bachelor undergraduate study, he succeeded in passing the examination of gazetted class III officer in 2017.

Anup believes that the reservation system should continue until the government civil service is representative for Dalits and Dalit civil servants can understand and empathize with the people who have faced similar situations and discriminations in their community. Most of the people who are below the poverty line are Dalits and hence he strongly believe that with the government priority and investment in health and education, they will be capable as well as confident enough to fight on their own. But he has seen people against reservation system who often claim that only Dalits of economically well-off families have entered the civil service through quota system. It is not true because he himself belongs to a family which has faced financial difficulties.

Dalits need to enter the government civil service, but they will still face discrimination under certain supervisors. Anup said, “It had already been three months that I joined the office as a Chief Administration Officer, but I was not assigned with any duties and responsibilities by my supervisor.” He then asked the supervisor for assigning him with his roles and responsibilities, but the supervisor denied saying that there was no work to be done by him. However, Anup had

already inquired with the heads of other offices and had confirmed that by then he must have been handed over his roles and responsibilities that he was entitled to. Such discrimination by the supervisor made him frustrated. He neither felt like going to the office, nor felt like talking to anybody. Luckily, he got transferred to his current office and was happy as he did not face any kind of discrimination there. In fact, he has now a very supportive and friendly work environment there.

Case three

Thirty-one-year-old Kundan is an Officer at PSC Central Office, Kathmandu. He first joined the civil service on February 7, 2013 as a Kharidar with his first posting at the Pachthar Prison Office in Province No. 1. He passed the Nayab Subba examination in 2016 and the Section Officer examination in 2017.

Prior to joining the GoN, he worked as a teacher in a renowned school of Kathmandu. He had not thought about a job in civil service before he saw his sister-in-law preparing for the PSC examination. Kundan too was encouraged by her, his wife and father-in-law to get into the civil service. However, the teaching job at school was important for him then, as his family was recovering from financial difficulties they had sustained after his mother fell sick.

Kundan was so busy in his teaching job that he hardly had any time to prepare for the PSC examination. Fortunately, there was a fifteen-day break at the school which he used to study and prepare for the examination. Despite preparing for only half a month, he was able to pass the exam.

“I belong to the group which is said to be incapable. If I had failed the examination in the first attempt and had there been no reserved seats for Dalits, I would have given up. My confidence level would have decreased, and I would have accepted myself as incapable,” he added.

In response to the claim that the reservation system is criticized for considering or favouring the only members of economically well-off families into the civil service through quota system, he said that no study had been conducted to prove that only members of economically well-off Dalit families had entered the government service through a reservation system. Further, he added that he knew 13 Dalit civil servants from Province No. 1, but neither anyone of them nor he belonged to wealthy families.

He shared his opinion that the reservation system should be continued until the representation of Dalits in civil service becomes 10 to 13 percent. He believes that successful entry of one Dalit into the civil service has multiplier effect. Presence of one Dalit in civil service from a community inspires and builds confidence of the other Dalit members. Further, he believes that the presence of one Dalit in an office affects the attitude and behavior of other employees towards Dalits. Further, he believes that traditional profession of Dalits (like weaving, carpet making, carving stones, and the like) involves creativity and their presence in the civil service will produce innovative ideas. But their ideas are often ignored. He shared his experience of being eligible for a promotion while he was at the post of Kharidar. Despite being eligible for promotion, he was never encouraged to apply and get the promotion. Rather, he felt that the supervisor was expecting Kundan to butter him up. There were situations where the supervisor looked for ideas from the employees of his office, but Kundan could feel that ideas from him were ignored and avoided. Kundan shared that he was not allowed for leaves even when there was no urgent work at the office.

Case four

Twenty-eight-year-old Rohan is a Bench Officer at Kathmandu District Court, Kathmandu. He joined the GoN civil service as a gazetted class III officer on December 15, 2017.

Rohan is a permanent resident of Tokha-04, Kathmandu and lives with his father, mother, younger sister and paternal grandmother. Rohan has faced caste-based discrimination all his life. Growing up he observed that his family had to wash dishes, collect water, and wash clothes at the community water tap only when no non-Dalits were using it. He had non-Dalit friends who used to invite him for their birthday celebrations, but he was not allowed to enter their house.

He further said, *"I belong to an economically poor family, and the way my family and I were treated by non-Dalits made me feel weak and fearful which resulted in the lack of confidence in me."* He further added, *"I feared talking and becoming a friend with others and I did not feel like expressing my views to others"*.

After completing his undergraduate degree, he started working in a private law firm. By then, a few of his school and college friends had already entered the government civil service. And it was only when they shared about being respected and earning good amount of money from the job that he, too, thought of trying for the civil service job. Rohan has been working as a government civil servant for the past four years and he too strongly believes that the reservation system should be continued for at least 10 years. He says that people in the Dalit community are still not politically and socially aware of the quota system allocated for them in the civil service, nor are they aware of how, after entering the civil service, Dalits will have access to resources, power and respect.

Rohan pointed out that people at the policy level should be aware of the reservation system and quotas and its fair distribution. He also shared how the system isn't always fair. He shared that civil service has a provision of appointing staff on contract basis as well, but only *'aafno manchey'* (persons in close contact) had the opportunities to enter the civil service; and only the well-educated and deserving Dalit candidates had entered the civil service through open competition and reservation quota system.

He said he had personally, however, never faced any form of visible discrimination. But he realized that though people spoke positively for lower caste people, they often did not have the best intentions. He could feel the difference in seniors' and colleagues' expressions when they introduced him. Furthermore, he felt that there were very few chances for him as a Dalit to get nominated for future opportunities in the office.

Common emergent themes***Low level of confidence***

As a historically marginalized community, Dalits have had little access to education, power and resources, which has inadvertently forced them to believe that they are less capable than others. As a result, they have low confidence. They hesitated to go for PSC examination initially thinking that they were incapable. But after entering the civil service, confidence level in Dalits rose and realized that they were also capable like other non-Dalits. Besides that, entering into the civil service has also helped them achieve better position in the society which has increased the level

of confidence not only among the ones who have entered civil service but also others within their community; and this has inspired them to try more for the PSC examination.

No evidence based reasons for criticizing reservation system

The Civil Service Act 1993 has introduced reservation system for those who are socially and economically backward. However, reservation system is generally criticized for creating space for individuals from economically well-off families only (Paudel, 2013). The minimum education qualification criterion for entering the civil service is such that the people below the poverty line cannot afford it. Hence, individuals below the poverty line, Dalits or non-Dalits, have still not made into the service. But all the research participants belong to the families who have faced hard times due to weak financial conditions. Furthermore, no evidence-based studies have been conducted to prove that only people from economically well-off Dalit families have entered the civil service through reservation system.

Rohan also added that some journalists and educated people misinterpreted the activities in civil service and started making an effort in removing quota system. He revealed that elites had entered civil service through the contract basis and not through the reservation system.

Need for higher representation of dalit in bureaucracy

According to the National Population and Housing Census 2011, Dalits constitute 13.6 percent of the total population of Nepal. However, the representation of Dalits in the bureaucracy is only one percent (DWO, 2018). Out of the 83,000 civil servants, only 108 Dalits hold the position of gazetted officers (Pariyar, 2017). Hence, Dalit civil servants who have entered the service through reservation system strongly feel that their representation quota should increase in the bureaucracy. Since Dalits constitute 13 percent of the total population of the country, the research participants want representation of their community in the civil service to be at least 10 to 13 percent.

Dalit civil servants believe that the representation of their community within civil service should be at least 10 to 13 percent. However, it does not matter what an individual or community believes, the thing that matters the most is national target. Hence government must be clear on the total representation of Dalits in its civil service.

Continuation of reservation system but not forever

Dalits who have entered the civil service through reservation system definitely want their representation to increase in the bureaucracy, but they shared a common view that the reservation system should not be continued forever. Dalits have realized that they are capable but the majority of the population within their community is poor and still not aware of the policies. Hence it is not the right time to remove the quota system and this study shows that it is fair enough to continue the reservation system. However, government needs to set a target for the composition of various groups within civil service after which the quota system could be removed.

Irresponsive service delivery

A major reason behind Dalits seeking their representation in the government is because they are not receiving expected services and opportunities from it. Most of the Dalits in the country are poor, and the way they are treated in the government offices by the civil servants makes it important for

them to increase representation of Dalits in the bureaucracy. Bureaucracy, with no doubt, should work for the welfare of Dalits for they are the marginalized groups of the country. However, it is understood that we tend to share our problems with people with whom we feel comfortable. The experience of Dalit civil servants show that the service receivers feel comfortable with Dalit service providers to share their problems. Furthermore, the presence of one Dalit in an organization helps to bring about changes in attitude and behavior of other civil servants towards Dalit service receivers to some extent. Dalit civil servants have expressed that they want representation of Dalits to increase in bureaucracy. It is obvious that they want to increase their representation with an expectation that slowly the number of Dalits in the policy making position will increase and will help improve their situation in the country via effective service delivery schemes and policies.

Shift in forms of discrimination

All the four research participants revealed that they had not been treated as untouchables, but expressed that they had felt being considered as incapable and not trustworthy. Hence it is found that discrimination has shifted from untouchability to restricting Dalit civil servants from getting various opportunities, benefits and guidance which are not directly visible to outsiders. The forms of discrimination Dalits are currently experiencing are: not being assigned responsibilities, non-Dalits avoiding ideas from them, accepting the same answer from junior but not from them, leaves not being approved and the like which are all indirect forms of discrimination. While having faced all these, Dalits who have entered the government civil service through reservation system feel isolated and perceive others see them incapable and not trustworthy.

Desire for encouragement from supervisors

All four participants revealed that encouragement from their supervisors at the workplace was missing. Assigning the duties and responsibilities to the Dalits civil servants and trusting their capabilities are some of the steps to start with for encouraging them. However, they are neither assigned with the duties and responsibilities nor are they trusted for the knowledge and experience they have. Bureaucrats are educated and they are expected to have leadership skills. One of the important leadership skills is to motivate and encourage subordinates. However, it is observed that some civil servants in the supervisory position have been discriminating their subordinates on the basis of caste.

Kundan shared that he was never encouraged to get promotion even when he was eligible for it. Furthermore, he had an experience of not being granted with a leave that he deserved. Rohan shared that he had very few chances of getting opportunities. Mahima's answer to the query of her supervisor was not accepted because he did not trust her ability, so he went to her junior and confirmed it in front of her. His behavior raised a question on her knowledge and capability. These are definitely a few forms of discrimination and these, in one way or the other, have discouraged them at their workplaces. If they had been accepted for their competences and abilities; their level of confidence would have increased which in turn would have encouraged them to perform better at their workplaces.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how Dalits perceive themselves as civil servants who entered the service through the reservation system. The study also attempted to explore their motives behind entering the civil service; understand the importance of reservation system for them and to understand if they still witnessed discrimination within their offices. The study found that Dalit civil servants who entered the civil service through reservation system still felt isolated and perceived others see them as incapable and not trustworthy. It was found that the form of discrimination had shifted from untouchability to restricting them from getting various opportunities, benefits and guidance which were not directly visible to outsiders. Hence, the only thing Dalits who enter the government through reservation system aspire to get is: receiving more encouragement at work, as they perceive such a thrust will nurture confidence and result in better performance.

The Government of Nepal has been investing a huge amount of money in education and in drafting new policies. One of the reasons behind this effort is to bring about positive social changes in the country. Education has helped improve qualification level of lower caste people and reservation system has given opportunities to uplift economic condition of their family by entering into the civil service. However, social change regarding discrimination, which lower caste people faced, has changed from direct to indirect form. Policy executors themselves have created different ways of discriminating Dalits in their organisations. This indicates that education and reservation systems are necessary, but are not enough for the type of social change we have imagined and dreamt of. Hence, further research needs to be carried out on how better changes could be brought about in the civil service for improving the lives of the Dalits in Nepal.

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