



## Caste-based Discrimination in Schooling: A Narrative Inquiry

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### Abstract

*This paper based on my MPhil dissertation which attempts to exemplify the way of caste-based discrimination practices around schools premises. The Dalit teachers who underwent various forms of such discrimination practices in their school life at different places of Dhading District are the narrated life hi/stories while pledging narrative inquiry. The method was developed with interpretive research paradigm as narratives had immeasurable potentialities to construct meaning of socio-cultural situatedness of Dalits' lives and caste-based schooling approach. I, as narrative inquirer, affirmed Freirean perspective to get insight on the nature of Dalit discrimination at school and the way they cope with it. Due to discrimination, there would be high rate of irregularity and dropout even still there is. However, at this context due to various reasons and efforts flexibility (improvement) is being taken places against caste-based discrimination at school in the name of inclusivity, encounters aged-long concept of social exclusion, in present days. It is, perhaps, because of transformative educational approach for a few decades. Transformative education is one of the best means to address Dalit issue with the advocacy of equality and equity. It is significant green signal of transforming ranked society into democratic one.*

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**Key words:** Discrimination, socio-cultural situatedness, narrative, Dalitization and transformative-education.

### Opening of Key Ideas

“To speak a true word is to transform the world.” Paulo Freire

Waiting and a long waiting, standing on the edge of life-wall, is being rituals for Dalits. Light of hope from eastern horizon to liberate life from untouchability has never been come, only waiting the new morning. Past begets present with hope for bright future. The nature itself seems transformative but lives of Dalit ‘what a non-transformative!’ because of so-called untouchability which induced social exclusion. The exclusion impinges social existence and meaningful life. Thus, my lived experiences are used as a paintbrush to create a textual image of exclusive social system on a canvas of Dalits’ lives. The canvas with questions such as who am I? And then what does the term ‘value’ mean for Dalits? Then, on the edge of canvas, it borders socio-cultural situatedness of Dalits’ life-world that fosters. Dalitization.

During my childhood and onwards, I more often heard the phrase from non-Dalit ‘don’t touch’ which strongly bordered my social life. Similarly, my mother used to say, “If you touch them, you may be caught with sin.” On the next hand, I countlessly saw that if Dalit touched non-Dalit, later used *Chhoichhito*<sup>1</sup> or *Sunpani*<sup>2</sup> to be holy themselves. Moreover, non-Dalits used to disseminate that touching textbooks and receiving education is equal to committing sin for Dalits,

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<sup>1</sup> Sprinkling of water drop to make the touched things holy

<sup>2</sup> Water touched by gold

on the next, Dalit parents used to think that people from *Sano-Jar*<sup>3</sup> like them no need of schooling their children. Such caste-based perspectives from non/Dalits separated the social and schooling life-world for centuries.

In this regard, the term ‘social exclusion’ is being a debatable issue for years in the area of social science which has subjectively negative value for certain group of people in general. The flash-board of MoE Nepal with slogan “Let’s avoid violence, sexual abuse and discrimination in school, let’s send all children to schools” for admission campaign in 2015. It dragged my thrust of knowledge in relation to discrimination in schools as a burning challenge which turned into my research agenda. Then, I could not escape from the question: why has discrimination been prevailing in schools? Therefore, I roamed around the literature that I found numbers of supportive ideas in relation to caste-based discrimination at schools. I got an insight for philosophical and theoretical mapping of my research journey. Out of many, Rao (2010) stated that Dalit students are not allowed to sit next to the high caste children in the class in certain remote area of Nepal (p. 104). In the same vein, Pivovarova (2010) has reported that caste-based discrimination is practiced at schools in various forms. In the past, Dalit students are forced for segregated seating and accounted as a matter of physical and mental bullying. Markos and Mc Whinney (2003) stated that marginalized people are ignored and restricted for education (p. 4).

Dalit students from Dhading Distict also have been facing caste-based discrimination practices around school and society. Dhading is one of 77 districts with multicultural and multiethnic zone of Nepal which lies in between northern Himalaya to southern Mahabharata hill range. It covers 1926 km<sup>2</sup> out of total land of Nepal. All are situated in hilly region where Kami, Sarki, Damai and Gaine are found among various caste groups of the locality. The dominant caste groups like- Brahmin, Kshatriya and Newar where Dalits occupied 9% out of total population of Dhading (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Therefore, my thrust of knowledge pushed me to look beyond my inner world and then allowed me to zoom out world around. And such a disseminated knowledge against caste-based discrimination at schools assisted me to look for further philosophical standpoint of my research.

### **Research Questions**

- How was untouchability being experienced by Dalit teachers throughout their life in school?
- What were the reasons behind excluding Dalits from schooling and socio-cultural mainstreaming in the past?

### **Methodological Mapping**

The research has become as a three-wheeled cart to move on towards my research agenda. A numbers of literature related to studied phenomena helped me to brush up my juvenile idea in order to build a philosophical mapping. Thereafter, I attempted to explore self (my inner world) for holding researcher positionality as a narrative inquirer which determined to affirm with narrative inquiry approach. The narrative inquiry method deals with life hi/stories of the subject being researched for exploring human centeredness and life-world. As suggested by Webster and Mertova (2007), narrative is an interpretation of personal and social stories on how life is instead

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<sup>3</sup> Lower caste (Dalit)

of an objective reconstruction of life (p. 3). I believe, story is un/emotionally created from lived experiences while sharing un/pleasant context of life. In this regard, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, narrative is not searching for truth but inviting others to see what I have seen to share common experiences. My ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions consist of the nature of being, knowing and valuing the truth/knowledge on the subject being studied. In this research, epistemology is subjective that can subjectively be constructed from human centeredness complexity. The nature of reality of this product is multiple which exists on the ground of socio-cultural, historical and contextual situatedness of self and others. Likewise, values are constructed out of the local, contextual way of knowing the self and world around. Hence, for me, values are contextual, multiple, hierarchical and caste-specific.

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) stated that educational experience should be studied narratively (p. 19). hence, I purposively approached to ten Dalit school teacher for narratives from different places of the ten VDCs of Dhading District of Nepal. These are Baseri, Budhathum, Salyantar, Dhola, Sankosh, Nilakantha, Nalang, Kumpur, Kallery and Gajuri, approximately 5-20 miles far from Dhadingbeshi (District headquarter) but their name and border has recently been changed for administrative purpose of feudal state. Further, I used critical reflexivity, trustworthiness and authenticity as the parameter of quality standard of my narrative inquiry. Critical reflexivity is a way of studying and exploring self critically. Self is combined form of soul and body. While exploring self critically meaning is emerged to construct knowledge of human world. Trustworthiness includes transferability, creditability, dependability and conformability of the research output as similar to the parameter validity, reliability and objectivity of the positivistic approach. Authenticity deals with the appearance of something whether being real or true or not. I used ethnological lens to see the participant world thus I did not use any research tool without consent of participants in order to set out research ethics.

### **An Appraisal: Critical Reflection on Untouchability**

In my locality, Dalit parents say “Children are not much interested to be regular in school; they rather enjoy in household chores.” On the next, I often hear from school teachers that Dalit children are found absent than non-Dalit ones in schools. One of the major challenges in education is retaining or increasing in dropout. In addition, for me, huge numbers of out of school children are certainly Dalit. Therefore, genuine question begins, why so? Why Dalit parents feel so? Why do teachers discuss in that way? If it is letting to be so the goals of EFA, SDG and MDG will never be met in Nepal. It is because there is still found significant information about dropout at different level of school. As mentioned on DoE Flash Report (2014/15), rate of dropout is 4.2%, 5.3 % and 5.3% in primary, lower secondary and secondary level respectively (p. 12). Out of this percent Dalit children occupied more than a third of fourth undoubtedly. It is perhaps due to financial constraints in general and caste-based discrimination in particular. To clarify it schooling history itself witnesses which was completely based on caste. Therefore, I intended to seek the answer of the kind of question how was untouchability being experienced by Dalit teachers throughout their life in schools?

The term caste is itself critical because of its nature of diversity. In this vein, Rajak (2015) stated that caste means race, lineal and breeds (p. 18). Therefore, caste determines forms of social structure thus form or our societies are not inclusive yet. It clearly seems clustered and

dispersed accordingly with caste belongingness visibly in rural area of Nepal. Societies are principally guided by socio-cultural norms and values which are generated from religious and legendary beliefs. Such a part of beliefs historically induced social restriction for Dalit known as social exclusion. Such exclusion was strongly practiced at the different level of society for centuries which was reflected at schooling practice as well. It seems against the human rights undoubtedly thus I raised couple of questions of the kind: Why are the human rights is being violated in Nepalese society? Why do schools not respect the child rights? Should not school teachers be responsible in this regard? The exclusion in education due to various reasons one of them is so-called untouchability which fosters caste-based discrimination at school. As a result, it would be high rate of irregularity and dropout even still there is. It is daunting challenge to meet EFA, SDG and MDG goals. The caste-based discrimination due to so-called untouchability Nepalese schools were not free for decades as explored by one my research participants, he narrated as *my memory of class three in 1989. I was forced to sit on the window instead of bench. Sometimes teachers forced me not to sit over there as well* (Interview, 23rd March, 2016). In this regard, Wagle (2012) stated that Dalit students sit separately in some rural schools, as a result, they are left to stand at the back of the classroom. Furthermore, it would blame Dalit children are slow learner and weaker performer. Hence, I think, such a constraint forces them to feel school as an unpleasant part of the society.

Along with caste-based values and social structure our schooling system was exclusive for centuries. The Rig Vedic concept on origination of human beings so-called Brahmin was generated from God's mouth and Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Shudra from hands, abdomen and feet respectively (Rig Veda, 10: 90). Since, Shudra from the feet then regarded as an unholy or socially unacceptable human beings. It was given hierarchical value to human beings. Similarly, as mentioned in Gita Krishna says, "I made four Varnas with different jobs and duties" (Bhagwat Gita, 4:13). Such a theological concept categorized the human beings, socially created hierarchical value of human and forced them to involve in different occupations according to the belonging Varna. For me, religious belief is one out of many causes of caste-based discrimination in schooling as mentioned Manusmriti, if a Shudra tries to acquire knowledge and participate in religious preaching as Brahmins do, the king should pour boiled oil in his/her mouth and ear (Chapter 8, Verse 273). Hence, a question raises- was it righteous? In was way of restriction in education for Dalit. In this regard, Timsina (2011) stated that Dalits are separate categories of human beings due to untouchability (p. 50). None of non-Dalit teachers forget to speak against untouchability at the classroom but in contrast follow the untouchable practice at their home that I have often been observing and experiencing in my locality. What a pedagogical dilemma and day to day practice! Therefore, it is time to seek out that what is being missed in our educational philosophy. Why non-Dalit teachers do knowingly involve in untouchable practice at their home and do speak against it at school. Of course, there might be gap in between way of acknowledging so-called untouchability by non-Dalit and speaking against it for the sake of respecting human rights and state regulations, therefore, it is now the turns to look over old-aged philosophies and present practice on the ground of dualism.

The narratives of this research have represented that there were used number of restrictive measures to practice caste-based discrimination at schools in the past. Those measures can be listed out as sitting arrangement, using drinking water, worshipping Saraswati temple, getting

shelter/rented room or access to school-hostel and so on. These all would use either structural or unstructured according to the context. Sitting arrangement would completely be on gender and caste belongingness. Drinking water would keep out of touching of Dalit children in the past. In this regard, Nambissan (2009) stated that Dalit children have to face caste-based prejudice in terms of using drinking water at school themselves (p. 25). Similarly, it would deny worshipping at Saraswati temple together with non-Dalit children, as mentioned by Bishwakarma (2013) I had to wait for a long time to worship at Saraswati temple in school (p. 72). Dalit children were not allowed to involve in tuition held into room of the house of non-Dalit. These sort of caste-based discrimination was strongly practiced at school in the past.

### **Excluding Dalits from Schooling and Socio-cultural Mainstreaming**

Historically, education was controlled by Brahmin which would be based on religion and its premises. Reading Vedas, chanting mantras and performing ritual would be the way of receiving knowledge, skills and forming morality in daily life. However, due to untouchability Dalit could not perform any of these as equal to Brahman or non-Dalit one. There would be severing restriction in relation to gaining education for centuries. It is because of our social values and norms, some them are believed blindly. The concepts from religious texts assisted to exclude Dalit from schooling, e. g. Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Gita etc. According to Ramayana, Bhai (2008) stated that, Lord Ramacut the head of Sambhuka (Shudra) who underwent to the penance to get divinity (p. 49). Similarly, as mentioned in Mahabharata, Massy (1997) stated that Dorna (Guru of Arjuna) forced Ekalavya to cut off right thumb who himself learned the archery as much as equal to Arjun (p.13). Both of these events symbolize caste-based discrimination in acquiring education. It seems structured restriction in education, as viewed by Timsina (2011) explicit restriction in schooling for low caste children (p. 60). Such a religion-based educational philosophies and practices failed to give due space for Shudra at school. Likewise, some legal provisions obstructed educating Dalit, for instant, Civil Code (1954) legalized untouchability which assisted in restriction for educating them for a long due to selfish interest of the Ranaism. In this regard, Timsina (2011), the education system ultimately serves the interests of the suppressors (p. 91). The so-called untouchability can be accounted as a product of religious belief and customary practices. In this regard, one of participants opined his story like: *while I admitted at school my father was criticized by non-Dalits as “You committed sin by sending your son at school who touched books. My father replied “I don’t care it, I let my son study”* (Interview, 13th February, 2016). Such a concept would intervene the Dalit education in the past. In such a way, forms of discrimination are determined/applied according to the community, culture and context.

The past discriminative schooling approach induced social exclusion, as a result, Dalit are lagging behind in power, politics and then out of socio-cultural mainstreaming and national development yet. Though restriction of schooling Dalit people would transfer their occupation-based knowledge and skills to their children at the place of Pindhi and house yard in the past. It would assist them for their livelihood. In this regard, Koirala (1996) stated that way of transmitting knowledge and skills would be at Pindhi and Baranda (outer part of the house) for Dalit children by parents (p. 199). It seems as an insightful example what talent that Dalit have and how it would transfer without being attend at state schools.

Out of many reasons of caste-based discrimination it can be said that religious belief, caste-based hierarchical social structure, social values, caste-based traditional occupations and caste-based hierarchical value of human beings are found as major causes of Dalits exclusion in education for the centuries. However, the structured form of caste-based discrimination at schools has significantly been controlled but found at social level yet. For a few decades, caste-based discrimination is being prevented due to inclusivity in education. It is because of initiation of transformative education for a few decades. In this regard, Chaula (2011) stated that inclusivity in education is a concept of mainstreaming differences with philosophy of positive valuation (p. 59).

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, caste-based discrimination was severely practiced at schools in the past. For instant, Dalits children were not supposed to be the worthy for acquiring knowledge and skills, as result, exclusion in education. However, later on, restriction got flexibility which resulted a few Dalit children in schooling access but retaining was the daunting challenge. Due to caste-based discrimination high rate of irregularity and dropout was took place even still there is. Discrimination at schools would be in different forms e. g. segregated sitting arrangement, not allowed to eat anything sitting with non-Dalits, not allowed to touching drinking water, bullying with caste-based expressions and biased punishment all these would, more or less, be flexible according to the community, culture, and context. Dalits were historically accounted as matter of controlled, dominated and subjugated human beings which appeared to be the same at school for decades. It seems as philosophical derailing in educational development. Moreover, it would common practice that Dalit children would be blamed as slow and weaker learner instead of motivating them for better learning in past schooling approach. What an amazing blame! All these restrictive measures were used in the different forms on the basis of religious belief, socio-cultural values, hierarchical human value, and caste-based occupations. All these reasons and forms of practices severely violated human rights to education. However, due to various reasons, one of them is inclusivity which always encounters aged-long concept of social exclusion. It advocates on the issue of depressed community in order to democratize society. Transformative education is one of the best means to address Dalit issue with the advocacy of equality and equity. Dalit discrimination is decreasing day by day which is green signal of transforming society into democratic one. It may lead to assist the sustainable development initiatives of the society onwards better future of all caste groups.

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