

Terai Dalits' Social Status in Nepal: Struggles and Aspirations

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Abstract

This study investigates the social status of Terai Dalits in Nepal, a marginalized community facing discrimination for centuries. The study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the origin, social status, and identity of Terai Dalits. The research follows a qualitative design, relying on various sources including secondary documents, books, journals, and websites. It explores the historical perspectives and feelings of the people, focusing on abstract concepts and definitions. Descriptive and analytical methods are employed, adhering to APA 7th edition citation and referencing guidelines. Terai Dalits in Nepal endure precarious social status characterised by economic deprivation, social ostracisation, and untouchability discrimination. They lack land ownership, struggle for education, and face challenges in accessing government resources and services. Discrimination extends to gender disparities, with Dalit women experiencing greater marginalization. Lingering feudalistic practices in Terai society exacerbate their plight, perpetuating a cycle of inequality. Terai Dalits face multiple obstacles, including limited access to policymaking, linguistic divisions, and class exploitation by local elites. Discrimination from both the state and upper-caste individuals contributes to their social exclusion. Terai Dalits' social status remains fragile, rooted in historical discrimination and cultural practices. To uplift their status, concerted efforts are required at local, regional, and national levels. Initiatives should aim to eradicate discrimination, promote education, and provide economic opportunities, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equal society for Terai Dalits in Nepal. A collective liberation movement united across linguistic divisions, could be instrumental in achieving these goals and breaking the cycle of inequality.

Keywords : community; empowerment; untouchability; caste discrimination; influence

Introduction

Dalits include people of many castes. The people of Dalits who have been living for centuries in the Terai region of Nepal are called 'Terai Dalits' (National Dalit Commission, n.d.). Terai Dalits, when compared to other caste groups living in the Terai region, have distinct professions and business practices. Moreover, within the Dalit community, some individuals engage in various professions and businesses. According to the National Dalit Commission's definition of Dalits and schedule caste, individuals residing in the Terai region of Nepal and prohibited from touching water taps are known as 'Terai Dalits'. These individuals are referred to as Terai Dalits due to their location of residence and their belonging to the Dalit community.

Nepal is geographically divided into three regions: the Himalayan, Hilly, and Terai. The Terai region, which is situated in the southernmost part of Nepal, extends from the Mechi River in the east to the Mahakali River in the west. It covers 17% of Nepal's land area and 23% in ecological terms. (Hachethu et al., 2010). The term 'Terai' originates from the Persian language, denoting a flat land with soft, wet soil (Gage, 2009). At present, the Terai region of Nepal comprises 21 districts. This area spans an average length of 885 km from east to west and an average width of 25 to 30 km from north to south. (Regmi, 1978). The Inner Terai, encompassing the plains between the Chure Mountains in the north and the Mahabharata Mountain range in the south, constitutes a significant portion of the Terai region (Hagan, 1970). The height of this area is from 59 meters to 610 meters above sea level. 53.66 % of the total population of Nepal lives in this area (Shrestha, 2022). The inhabitants of the Terai region in Nepal are divided into Aryans, Mongols, and Dravidians, with the Dalit community residing in the Terai belonging to the Aryan race, characterized by thin, tall, wheat-brown complexion, and pointed noses. (Srivastava, 1992). Those Aryan people who expanded in ancient India later expanded to the Terai region of Nepal.

Terai Dalits, residing in the southern plateau of Nepal since ancient times, have been left behind in every aspect compared to other Dalit and non-Dalit communities in the country (Jha, 2000). Dalits are still distinguished from others based on their exclusion from society's water supply, low-status work, and occupations such as cleaning public areas, managing the deceased, and disposing of animal carcasses (Bishwakarma, 2012). Terai Dalits in Nepal lag economically, socially, and educationally compared to other castes and communities in the region. Geographically identified as belonging to the Dalit community based on their caste, Terai Dalits in Nepal have long been living in the Terai region, where they share cultural and marriage similarities with northern India. In contrast, hilly Dalits residing in Nepal's hilly region have different physical appearances and colours. (Rizal, 2006). Terai Dalits are distinguished from other Terai residents based on this characteristic

The etymology of the word 'Dalit' can be traced

back to Sanskrit and it was first used in 1927 by Bhimrao Ambedkar to refer to the untouchables, a caste under Sudravarna in Hindu society, and since 1968 it has been respectfully used in Nepal to refer to the entire untouchable class (Pandey, 2007). The term 'Dalit' has replaced various derogatory terms like untouchable, Harijan, paragonite, pancham, antayaj, and lower caste to refer to socially and economically disadvantaged groups in Nepal. The Nepali Brihat Sabdakos defines the term 'Dalit' as referring to castes or groups that face unequal rights, lack of respect and prestige, and exploitation due to the unequal social system. (Parajuli, 1993). The Neglected, Oppressed, and Dalit Class Upliftment Development Committee Formation Order 1997 defines Dalits as a traditionally business-earning community that is economically and socially backward, and feels humiliated and looked down upon. The 'Dalit Upliftment and Protection Bill 2002' defines Dalits as a caste that suffers from untouchability, economic exploitation, political neglect, educational backwardness, and religious and cultural disregard (Pandey, 2007). The term Dalit is employed to denote individuals who are socially, economically, and politically marginalized, lack equal status with other social classes; and require state protection due to their disadvantaged status.

The Dalit people living in Nepal are studied by dividing them into three categories. They are Khas Pahadiya Dalits, also called hill Dalits, Terai Dalits, and Newar Dalits. Hill Dalits include Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gayne and Badi. Newar Dalits include Dhobi, Kasai, Kusule, Pode, Chame, Napit, Kapali, etc. while Terai Dalits include Collar, Kakaihiya, Kori, Khatik, Khatwe, Chamar, Chidimar, Dom, Tatma, Dusadh-Paswan, Dhobi, Pathharkatta, Pasi, Batar, Musahar, Halkhor, Sarbhang, Natuwa, Dhandi, Dharikar-Dhankar (Regmi, 2009). For centuries, Dalits in Hindu society were excluded from temples, education, and better-paying jobs due to their economic weakness. They were also prohibited from planting certain trees, celebrating festivals with pomp, digging ponds for prestige, and dining in public hotels and restaurants. The discrimination included being denied food, access to high-level meetings and conferences, and even touching upper-caste people. This has resulted in their being referred to as Dalits and being among the most disadvantaged groups in society

(Vishwakarma, 2011). Such distinctions are more deeply established in Terai society than in Hill and Newari communities.

The study aims to examine the social status of Dalits living in the Terai region of Nepal, who have been subjected to discrimination for centuries. Its significance lies in shedding light on the significant differences in dignity, identity, and humanity among different groups of people in the 21st century. The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Terai region of Nepal, and the Dalit community's origin, social status, Struggles, Aspirations and identity.

Methods and Procedures

This study is based on the qualitative research design that aims to explore the identity, and social status of Terai Dalits in Nepal. This research study has relied on various sources, including secondary documents. These sources have been gathered from various libraries, self-collections, and other locations. The hypothesis is generally not used in this research design, and instead, the perspective and feelings of people are explored from a historical background. The study is based on abstract concepts, and definitions, and analyzes social, cultural, and structural context and perception. The research framework is exploratory and flexible, focusing on motivations and encouraging self-discovery. Books, journals, and websites have been used as sources, while factors such as profession, financial resources, education, health, traditional values, and beliefs have been considered in analyzing the social status of Terai Dalits. Descriptive and analytical methods have been adopted from private collections and libraries to complete the study. The study follows the APA 7th edition method for citing and referencing sources, ensuring accuracy and consistency in the research.

Results and Discussion

The social status of Dalits living in the Terai region of Nepal is fragile and precarious. This is compounded by cultural traditions, lack of education, and limited public awareness, leaving them vulnerable and marginalized.

Origin and Development of Dalit

The caste system in India evolved from the varna system. Untouchability developed from this same system. To study the tradition of caste differentiation, we must examine early civilizations. As wealth increased, discrimination for gain also increased. This led to the practice of forcing others to work and degrading them. The desire for power, property, and prestige in society further reinforced this behaviour. Discrimination against agricultural labourers and enslaved individuals existed in ancient Egypt, but it did not reach the level of untouchability (Senart, 1975). As a result of varying behaviours and perspectives towards others, different caste groups emerged in countries such as England, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland, and Lithuania, as well as among ethnic groups such as African Americans, African blacks, and European whites. Even within these caste groups, there were instances of domination, discrimination, control, and forced labour. (Davis, 1968). Caste discrimination was prevalent in the agricultural era, but untouchability was a unique practice that developed only in ancient Indian society. It gradually spread to Nepal, particularly in the Terai region.

Social Status of Terai Dalit

Extensive research reveals that the social status of Dalits residing in the Terai region of Nepal is exceedingly precarious, beset by a multitude of factors. The primary drivers of their subjugated status include economic deprivation, social ostracization, and rampant untouchability discrimination. In addition, the harsh treatment meted out to Dalit women and the inability of the state to provide adequate support has further compounded their struggles. The deeply entrenched discriminatory cultural practices, coupled with limited access to education and minimal public awareness, have also contributed to their plight. Moreover, their lack of awareness of health and well-being only serves to exacerbate their vulnerability.

Economy Base Status

The majority of Terai Dalits are facing severe economic hardships, with land ownership serving

as the primary determinant of their economic status in the region for centuries. Most of the Dalits in Nepal have limited land ownership, with even those who own land having very little. The land they have only produces enough for a few months, and they lack the knowledge to increase production. To make ends meet, they often turn to local nobles and moneylenders for loans, which often come with high interest rates and force them to work in the lender's house. As a result, they struggle to access education and are consumed with basic needs, such as food and shelter, leaving little room for anything else. (Jha, 2000). The precarious economic condition of Dalits in Nepal's Terai region has resulted in their significant marginalization within society. Their lack of financial resources has perpetuated their disadvantaged social status, further underscoring the interdependent relationship between the two.

Society Base Status

Due to social discrimination, Dalits in Terai face numerous challenges that have contributed to their marginalized status. These include a lack of public awareness, early marriages and childbirth, poor sanitation and hygiene practices, and limited access to clean water sources. Moreover, due to their poor economic condition and lack of health awareness, they are often forced to consume the meat of dead animals. This further exacerbates their already dire situation, as they are relegated to low-status jobs and suffer from a deep sense of self-pity. (Cameron, 2010). Terai Dalits are socially marginalized due to their distinctive behaviour and food habits. They struggle to gain respect within the broader community, as they are confined to their community and lack access to opportunities beyond their locality.

Terai Dalits in Nepal have been systematically marginalized by society and the state, with neglect stemming from regional, economic, linguistic, educational, occupational, and accessibility disparities. Their joint family system further complicates their lives, leading to chaos and difficulty managing large families. They also lack access to an equitable share of state resources and services. (Bishta, 2000). Terai Dalits lack knowledge of how to access national resources, while the state's attention to their needs is inadequate. They also face obstacles in accessing

the state-provided Dalit quota, which is mainly allocated to hill-dwelling Dalits. Additionally, they lag significantly behind their hill-dwelling counterparts in terms of competing for limited resources available to Dalits.

Untouchability Based Status

Terai Dalits face untouchability and other forms of discrimination, which are not experienced by their hill-dwelling counterparts (Rajak, 2008). Inadequate education has led to a deprivation of opportunities, resulting in a stagnant standard of living. Currently, Terai Dalits continue to be oppressed, perpetuating the cycle of inequality (Wagley, 2004). Terai Dalits face accusations of witchcraft and are discriminated against in social situations, such as being denied access to public places due to fear of touching others. Despite some reduction in discrimination, their living standards have not significantly improved.

Women Base Status

The people of Dalit residing in the Terai region of Nepal exhibit gender disparities, where women are found to be more marginalized, exploited, and impoverished in comparison to men. Regrettably, they are unable to exercise any control over land, housing, or finances and are instead coerced into menial tasks. The majority of Terai Dalit women remain unaware of their entitlement to receive a citizenship certificate from the state, and those who do, avoid the process as it proves to be an arduous task. Consequently, they are deprived of many state-provided amenities. Furthermore, Terai Dalit women tend to refrain from participating in elections, and even in seeking advice or assistance from government employees, owing to their reluctance to converse with them. (Khadka et al., 2007). Terai Dalit women's limited participation and involvement have resulted in their continued marginalization, hindering their ability to confidently express themselves and take control of their lives. Language barriers exacerbate their difficulties, as their limited proficiency in Nepali prevents them from effectively communicating with government employees.

Status of Other Bases

According to the 2011 census, the number of

Dalit communities in Nepal is 13.6 per cent (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). However, their presence at the policy-making level has been negligible. Even in that, the representation of Terai Dalits is still low compared to the people of the hilly Dalit. Not only the people of the Terai Dalit, who have been living in the Terai region of Nepal for generations but also the people of the hilly Dalit who have migrated from the hilly areas have been subjected to the same discrimination and untouchability (Kharel, 2001). Research indicates that many hilly Dalits in Nepal conceal or alter their surnames due to fear of discrimination based on untouchability and other factors. This practice extends to hilly Dalits who have migrated to Terai, with some choosing to hide their caste altogether. Such behaviour underscores the complexity of the challenges faced by Dalits in Nepal and highlights the need for greater efforts to address discrimination and promote social justice.

Dalits in Nepal, who have lived in the country for centuries, are subject to a low quality of life due to discrimination, untouchability, and social disadvantage. Terai Dalits face particularly challenging circumstances, with high levels of poverty and low socioeconomic status. Terai Dalits are present in all Terai districts and are frequently squatters, with 44 per cent lacking land ownership. These challenges highlight the need for increased attention and support to address the systemic inequalities facing Nepal's Dalit communities (Ahuti, 2010). The combination of landlessness and poor economic conditions forces Dalits to rely on wage labour, making it difficult to obtain permanent employment and sustain a livelihood.

In Nepal, the Terai society is considered more feudalistic, corrupt, and superstitious than the hilly society, leading to significant challenges for the Terai Dalit community. These challenges include being relegated to a lower socio-economic status, with many forced to work as *Harwa*, *Charwa*, *Halia*, or even slaves due to economic pressures. Terai Dalits face difficulties accessing government jobs, due in part to a lack of representation in administrative bodies. Other challenges include the dowry system, caste exploitation, domestic violence, and the struggle to make ends meet, resulting in physical and emotional distress. As a result, Terai Dalits often appear weak, thin, haggard, black, and slender (Michael, 2011).

Due to a lack of timely medical treatment and the impact of feudal culture, particularly in the Terai region, Dalits in Nepal are at risk of premature death, as they have historically accepted social exploitation as a duty.

Primary Reasons for the Problems of Terai Dalits

- (a) Lack of access to the policy-making level of the state: Nepal's historically centralized politics has resulted in decreased regional involvement, with people in far western and Terai regions unable to properly participate in policy-making and administration; despite efforts to promote the involvement of all caste, regional and sex groups, Terai Dalits continue to lack access to the policy-making level, perpetuating their longstanding problems.
- (b) Linguistic problem: Terai Dalit people are divided into linguistic groups and have been discriminated against due to the Nepal government's single language policy, resulting in their limited access to jobs and inability to communicate effectively with relevant bodies.
- (c) Class exploitation: Most Dalits in Terai, Nepal don't own land and depend on local wealthy people who exploit them by charging high interest, keeping them in debt, treating them like slaves, and making them work without pay. The local capitalists take advantage of their vulnerability and this is called class exploitation (Ahuti, 2004).

The problems faced by the Terai Dalit in Nepal are not just due to discrimination from the state, but also from the local upper class and caste people. To address these issues, discrimination from the upper caste and class people should be ended first, followed by providing the Terai Dalit with reservation, education, security, and equality in the state (Thorat, 2012). Creating an inclusive environment in which Terai Dalits feel a sense of belonging and have access to resources and opportunities like other caste groups is crucial for their integration into the state of Nepal.

The Terai Dalit people are facing various forms

of discrimination and exploitation leading to their social, economic, political, and educational exclusion from society, and this has left them feeling like second-class citizens in Nepal (Aahuti, 2011). Terai Dalits face discrimination and untouchability in various daily activities, such as fetching water, cleaning utensils, entering temples and houses, and going to school, resulting in their division into touchable and untouchable groups who do not intermarry (Vishwakarma, 2011). Compared to the Dalits living in the hilly region, the people of the Dalits in the Terai have been living a hellish and painful life in a sense (Chaudhri, 2008). To address the issue of discrimination towards Dalits, a local-level public campaign is needed to change traditional social practices and recognize discrimination as a social crime, to gradually decrease and eventually minimize discriminatory behaviour towards Dalits in Terai society.

The people of Terai Dalit need to unite to improve their social status and overcome the obstacles they face, including linguistic differences. A collective liberation movement can help end their troubles and bring unity to the community (Chaudhary, 2011). The fragmentation of Terai Dalit people is caused by linguistic differences and internal untouchability, leading to division into small units. A successful Dalit liberation movement requires eliminating these divisions and achieving education to raise their social status.

Conclusion

For centuries, human settlements have thrived in Nepal's Terai region, with Hindus making up the majority of the population. Unfortunately, discriminatory behaviour that originated in ancient Indian society has persisted to this day, influencing the social dynamics of the Terai society. The deeply ingrained practice of untouchability has resulted in the weak social status of the Terai Dalit people, who face numerous forms of discrimination. They are prohibited from accessing public places, running businesses, or even entering temples and using public taps and wells. Education opportunities are limited due to their economic status, and unemployment rates are high due to illiteracy. As a result, their social status has remained stagnant. To improve their standard of living and uphold their social dignity, strong campaigns by the federal, provincial, and local governments are needed.

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