

Impact Analysis of Caste Dynamics in Education in Nepal

Saleem Dhobi¹

Abstract

This paper examines caste dynamics that affect the status of education in Nepal. How people get vulnerable to the implications of the caste hierarchy that directly controls their lives in society is the primary question to be dealt with in this article. The objective of the paper is to explore the effects of caste hierarchy in Hindu social system wherein an individual's caste determines her or his education attainment. Generally, children from the so-called upper caste families have better education than those of the so-called lower caste families because of the social, economic and cultural privilege given to the people of the so-called upper castes including Brahmin, Chhetris, and Baishya. In contrast, the children from the Dalit families are usually deprived of societal opportunities including education and cultural priority. The finding of the research demonstrates that people from the Dalits (so-called lower families) have been marginalized, underprivileged and sidelined in almost all arenas of lives and therefore, their societal status has been lower and their lifestyles have been poorer than those of the so-called upper caste groups which are valued and prioritized in almost all affairs of Nepalese society. The dichotomy between the so-called upper caste and the so-called lower caste groups has created a rift and still retains in the overall society. Consequently, both of these communities segregate each other in terms of cultural practices and social activities. The reflection of the caste hierarchy can also be perceived in the political domain as well. By using the qualitative research design, the paper has been prepared for justifying the assumption that caste dynamics affect the education standing of people in Nepal.

Keywords: Caste, Dynamism, Hierarchy, Dalits, Brahmins, Privilege, Deprivation

Introduction

This paper demonstrates the interrelationship between caste and individuals' access to education in Nepal. Caste system is deeply rooted in social, cultural, economic and political life of people across the country. Caste directly affects one's

1. English Department, Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal
Email: saleemphd.tu12@gmail.com

Article history: Received on: Nov. 15, 2024; Accepted on: Dec. 20, 2024; Published on: Jan. 31, 2025
Peer Reviewed under the authority of THE ACADEMIA, journal of NUTAN, central committee, Kathmandu, Nepal, with ISSN 2350-8671 (Print).



Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

access to education and it poses diverse challenges to people who belong to the so-called lower families. Dalits, the so-called lower castes often suffer discriminations in societal institutions. Even teachers from the so-called upper castes discern children from the Dalit community. Opportunities for personal development and recreational activities are provided to the children from the so-called upper castes more than to the children from the Dalit families. This explicit discrimination prevails in almost all societal frameworks across the country. The Dalits have been excluded from formal education historically and to a large extent, they have been segregated at schools in many cases. They have been considered impure and untouchable. In many ceremonial and religious rituals, they have been allowed to participate. There are numerous instances heard wherein Dalits and their children are brutally tortured in case they participate in the public affairs and activities. The children from the so-called upper castes have enjoyed more access and opportunities in terms of infrastructure and social networks than the children of the Dalit community. Because of such predicaments, children from the Dalit families experience diverse barriers to education and other opportunities for personal and professional growth in life. Caste-based discrimination and stigma make school environments hostile for students from the Dalit families. In many cases, teachers, peers, and students of the other grades in schools and in some cases, school administrators reinforce caste-based prejudices. Consequently, the students from the so-called lower castes fail to succeed educationally. Bullying, harassment, insult and boycott based on the caste differences in schools are common and the children from Dalit families mostly vulnerable in this regard.

In Dalit communities especially in the remote part of hilly region and in the plain of Nepal, children are forced to work rather than to go schools because of poor economic conditions of their respective families. Parents do not have sufficient resources to feed and educate their children. The programs and campaigns of the governments of Nepal do not seem effective in bringing about changes in their educational status. Without addressing the economic issues of the Dalits, educational programs cannot be made successful. Education for all is imperative in accordance with the constitution of Nepal 2015. However, children from Dalit communities do not seem capable of getting the advantage of the educational provision. Many Dalit families have financial burden of schooling including tuition fees, uniforms, stationery, transportation. Consequently, many parents get helpless to carry on the burden and their children drop out from the schools.

In many cases, children from the upper castes have access to quality education and private schools and colleges. Their children become more capable academically than the children of the so-called lower caste groups as the education quality in public schools where the concentration of Dalit children is higher is not ensured.

Review of Literature

The studies conducted on the education of different caste groups in Nepal demonstrate that caste is an explicit barrier to education of the unprivileged communities especially Dalits in Nepal. However, the research undertaken by Ojha (2017) presents an opposite perception and information. For him, “caste has the least or insignificant role in an individual’s access to politics; meaning the traditional belief that upper caste people have obviously better access to politics and political representation doesn't hold any ground”. Nevertheless, he adds the people of the lower caste have had commendable access to politics. His study on the caste dynamics and their impact on access to politics shocks the common people who think caste can be a determinant to increasing access of people to societal institutions including education. Dalits have better access to politics according to Ojha (2017, p. 75). I do not think the researcher has deeply investigated into the issue for objective condition of the Dalits and their political and social status in Nepal. Undoubtedly, there have been some initiatives for the upliftment of Dalits in the political domain. However, the implementation of the inclusive policies is insignificant. The representation of Dalits in politics is ceremonial. The decision-making power is limited to the people of the so-called upper castes including Brahmins, Chhetris, Yadavs, and some Newars who control the resources of the country. Even the caste-based quota has not been able to reform the situation of Dalits over the years. Ojha’s study on education of different caste groups exhibits the comparable status of education attained by people of the so-called lower castes and those of the so-called upper castes including Brahmins and Chhetris. He has explored:

The respondents’ academic qualifications have been interpreted as their level of education. The academic qualifications include illiterate, School Leaving Certificate, Intermediate Level and Bachelors Level, and they have been quantified accordingly for putting them into data. Among the respondents, 13% are illiterate, 40% SLC graduate, 18% Intermediate Level and 29% are Bachelor’s level. Similarly, the respondents' castes being upper caste (Brahmin/Chhetri) and Dalit have been quantified to interpret them quantitatively. (2017, p. 81)

The extract presents diverse conditions of people based on the education attainment. However, the data cannot represent the entire population of the country and their education status. This is intentional data collected to justify that Dalits do not have problems regarding education attainment and they do not experience discrimination in Nepalese society. Hence, Ojha’s research is partial and parochial in the sense that it has not been able to capture the real picture of Nepalese society that practices caste hierarchy very rigidly. Besides, Ojha has related his research with the political positions and access to power based on the caste differences in Nepalese society.

For him, out of total 12 illiterate respondents, only 17% have some kind of political position, whereas the rest 83% have no such political position. It demonstrates that “the illiterate people have the least to no opportunity for access to politics and political representation. They are deprived of the opportunity to obtaining political position just because they are not educated” (2017, p. 84). The data is not clear and objective. The reliability of such research is questionable as it does not present any segregated data of all the caste groups in a systematic manner.

Bhawan Singh Chalaune (2020) has explored the practice of caste-based discrimination in both society and schools. Nepalese schools and society in entirety are not free from prejudices that affect the education attainment by the so-called lower children. Although caste-based discrimination is constitutionally illegal, it is widely and still practiced in almost all arenas of Nepalese society and the children of Dalit community are becoming victims. Chalaune has stated:

And yet Dalit students have felt some kind of discrimination in the education system. Due to this discrimination, Dalit students have faced psychological effects with their school participation and performance. Dalit students also think that schools cannot fulfill their expectations due to school actions as reproducing social norms. The issue of education that excludes Dalits is still challenged. (2020, p. 147)

Caste-based discrimination retains in the education system. The impact of Hindu social system based on caste hierarchy reflects in the educational institutions. The social norms and values are celebrated and practiced in educational institutions and the children from Dalit community are excluded and deprived of opportunities for growth and groom in terms of career and personality. As a result, both participation and performance of the Dalit children are terribly affected. Chalaune has related the current condition of Nepal with the history of public education that began mostly after the political reformation in Nepal. Undoubtedly, it brought about tremendous changes in the educational participation of children from diverse communities regardless of caste differences. The positive aspect of the education reformation after 1951, students from Dalit community massively increased and the children were included in the mainstream schooling without any constitutional prohibition. However, the children from Dalit groups could not participate as much as they could due to the indelible impression and practice of caste hierarchy in the societal institutions. The status of Dalits in education during and before the monarchical rule was terribly lower. Since the restoration of democracy in 1990, the Dalits have started feeling much better and have been relatively more comfortable in attaining education in Nepal.

Following the reestablishment of democracy in 1990, education grew considerably. The government began offering free education at the primary level for all children. The government initiated special initiatives to boost school enrollment by providing

oil and wheat flour to families that enrolled their children in schools. Constitutional regulations, together with a focus on education, and parents' hopes for their children's schooling led to a growing number of Dalit children attending schools. Nevertheless, the educational condition of Dalits reveals a decreased literacy and enrollment rate, an increased dropout rate in the initial school years, and a higher frequency of repetition and failure compared to individuals from other castes (UNESCO, 2013). Despite numerous efforts by the government of Nepal after the restoration of democracy, the condition of Dalits in terms of education has not significantly changed due to deep-rooted practices of caste hierarchy and discrimination in society in general and in schools in particular. Therefore, Dalits are still facing caste-based discrimination in academic institutions across the country. Teachers and peers directly or indirectly discriminate with the children of Dalit community. The practice of untouchability in the remote part of Nepal pervades. The children of Dalits feel vulnerable and lose their confidence in most of the cases when they get to participate and perform in the educational institutions. The psyche of such children is terribly affected by the practice of caste-based discrimination in 21st century when the information and technology are skyrocketing. The study undertaken by Chalaune demonstrates:

Thirty seven percent respondents have responded that there is no untouchability in schools and only 7.2 percent respondents have said that untouchability still prevails in schools. Nearly fifty six percent (55.7%) respondents have said that untouchability has been decreasing in relation to the past. Similarly, 51.5 percent students have responded the happening of direct and indirect caste discrimination with them. (2020, pp. 149-150)

The extract clarifies that untouchability has decreased tremendously. However, it needs to be eliminated from schools. The government and other concerned parties still need to work for improving the condition of Dalits in educational institutions. Comparatively, the schools have been caste-free zones. The practice of caste discrimination can directly be linked with the social values and assumptions of Nepalese society. What kind of gossip parents have in the surrounding of their children matters that children learn about the caste differences and hierarchy. If parents stop talking about the caste system and its features, of course, their children do not internalize about the lower caste and upper caste. Hence, the improvement and reformation need to be in the social affairs particularly in the families that constitute the social minds of children. The study shows that Dalit students do not understand their teachers as they do not let students feel comfortable and easy in the classroom. Mostly teachers are from the so-called upper castes and they generally do not endeavor to understand the psyche and deal with them accordingly. Chalaune has found:

Thirty two percent Dalit students said that they do not understand what teachers teach and 41.7 percent said that they understand a little bit only. Teachers

do not make the subject matter clear. Nearly 75 percent Dalit students have responded that there is no interaction in the classrooms. It was found that only 21.7 percent children ask questions if they do not understand lessons. It seemed that nearly 66 percent Dalit students do not ask questions if they do not understand the teachers' teaching. Dalit students said that teachers do not provide opportunities to ask questions. They said that the main cause of not asking questions is the fear of teachers' mocking, not getting satisfactory answer and what to ask if they do not understand. Nearly 18 percent Dalit students responded that they don't ask questions due to the fear of scolding by the teachers. Nearly forty-nine (48.5) percent students responded that they don't ask questions due to not getting satisfactory answers. Similarly, 25 percent Dalit students do not ask questions because they do not understand what is taught. (p. 151)

Almost one third of the Dalit students do not understand the subject matter taught by the teachers in the classroom. Besides, teachers hardly have interactions with them as well. Teachers do not bother to explain the subject matter clearly so that students from Dalit community cannot comprehend and can perform better in the exam. Mostly Dalit children remain silent and do not feel commendable to interrogate in the classroom. Perhaps they find the classroom environment embarrassing. Due to lack of interaction and comprehension, students cannot achieve their academic goals. The implications of such poor educational environment reflect in their failure of achieving good positions in society during adulthood.

Sangita Thebe Limbu (2021) has analyzed the caste dynamics as seen in the schools where students' surname matters and becomes one of the significant subjects of inquiry. Students are treated accordingly. The incident in which students are found to be hiding their surnames. It shows that Nepalese schools do not include and respect students of all caste groups. Rather they discard the students from Dalit community. The stigma of caste badly affects students' psyche and discourages them from performing better. Limbu has brought about the incident in which students hesitate to assert their surnames:

At school, whenever anybody asked her what her surname meant, she would either say Chhetri or that she did not know. She remembers one particular incident when a dance teacher inquired about her surname. Her response was that she did not know. However, one of her friends interjected and said that according to her grandmother, Aditi's surname belonged to *sāno jāt* or "lower caste". (2021)

Even the teachers are found much concerned about the surname of the student. The peers and classmates are also hostile to the students who belong to the so-called lower caste. The social scenario as perceived in the school embarrasses students from the

Dalit community. In reverse, the students from the so-called upper castes proudly assert their surnames. Dalit children are forced to hide their surnames. Otherwise, they would be insulted and discriminated against by both teachers and peers at school. The experience of Aditi who still remembers the incident in which she felt uncomfortable when she had to assert her surname. The incident of Aditi exemplifies many cases in which children from Dalit community either lose their confidence or lead a reluctant life at school. The childhood experience of Aditi leads her to stay interested about her caste category in her adulthood. She becomes quite curious to investigate into the caste-hierarchy and the concept of Dalit when she pursues her Bachelor's degree. Her confusion about the caste system compels her to inquire into the caste differences (Limbu, 2021, p. 82). In fact, schools do not openly promote caste-based discriminations. Their policies are inclusive and discrimination-free. However, the schools are found silent in case students from Dalit community are discriminated and insulted in the public. Instead, schools should take actions against those who impose prejudices and discriminate with the students of the so-called lower families. In comparison to public schools, private schools are strict in controlling the cases of discriminations and prejudices based on caste hierarchy. The reason for such practices may be commercial. They endeavor to ensure quality education equally to all students regardless of the caste, culture, ethnicity, and religion.

Methods and Materials

The researcher has used critical analytical approach to the secondary sources of materials in this article. It is purely based on qualitative research design that organizes the qualitative data for analysis and interpretation. The article relates the socio-cultural status of the so-called lower caste students with their education attainment journey. The information used in the paper is massively drawn from the secondary sources including research articles, research reports, dissertations and periodicals. The researcher has some of the latest research-based writings on the topic and have concluded that no writing in entirety has shown how caste affects education in Nepal. The materials have been both electronic and printed.

Discussion

Nepal is a culturally diverse country that harbors people of multiple languages, cultures, ethnicities and castes. It is socially Hindu-dominated state wherein the caste hierarchy affects almost all aspects of life. People are either privileged or underprivileged based on their belonging to a particular caste. The impact of this caste hierarchy is explicitly seen in the schools that either remain silent or do not take any actions against those who discriminate against the students from the so-called lower castes. Both teachers and parents are responsible when the students are discriminated at schools. If parents do not teach their children about the caste hierarchy, their

children do not internalize the caste complex and do not behave with their colleagues accordingly at school. The research shows that most of the teachers at school are from the so-called upper castes.

Even in India, caste system dominates the social life of people greatly. People from the so-called upper castes take their surnames as the ascribed hierarchies. As a framework of ascriptive hierarchies (Jodhka, 2016), the disparities of caste, however, concerns of power are equally significant as those related to race, ethnicity, or gender. In the wake of Ambedkar, caste is perceived as a relational framework, which indicates that 'caste in the singular form is a fiction. Castes exist solely in the plural form. Caste does not exist: there are "Always castes"' (Ambedkar 2011, p. 29). The impact of caste system on Nepalese institutions is unavoidable.

The governments of Nepal at different phases of history have taken some initiatives for ensuring an equal society to all regardless of the caste differences since the restoration of democracy in 1990. However, the implementation of the constitutional acts and policies has been very weak. Consequently, the educational institutions do not seem obliged to these policies that can help students from Dalit community experience equality and fairness in the school environment. Although there have been reservations for the children of Dalits in educational domain, they still do not get support and encouragement from both school management and teachers when being discriminated in the premises of school. This perpetual discrimination and injustice lower the confidence level of students from Dalit community.

In fact, caste has been influencing the quality of education since the time immemorial. The students from the Dalit community have been deprived of equal opportunities in schools and colleges in Nepal. The situation of theirs was adverse during the Panchayat System and even before. After the reestablishment of democracy, the efforts of non-government organizations and Dalit community have resulted in attaining some special focus on Dalits and their education. However, the implications of the reservations and special privileges given to Dalit students do not ensure the complete practice of democratic norms and values. Because of poor economic backgrounds, the Dalits cannot afford expensive education catered in private institutions. In some cases, they even cannot put their children in schools because they cannot feed and provide school uniforms and stationery to their children. The required actions and initiatives have not been taken by the government of Nepal. Therefore, the children from Dalit community are still vulnerable in terms of quality education. Their caste has become a stigma and an explicit barrier to their education. Caste-based discrimination often perpetuates continues in colleges and universities as well. The students of Dalit community do not have access to higher education as much as the students from the so-called upper castes in Nepalese society. The higher education is expensive and generally Dalits cannot afford the expensive education catered in

both public and private institutions. In public schools, their access seems possible and school education is attainable but higher education is beyond the reach of many Dalit families in Nepal because of long-time economic and cultural exploitation.

Besides education, even health of the Dalits has been terribly affected due to their low economic status. History is evident that Dalits in South Asia including Nepal have been on the margin in economic affairs and possessions. Consequently, their access to education and health has been badly affected. S. Verma and SS Acharya (2018) have specified the health issue faced by the Dalit community due to their poor social status. Although health facilities must be equitably distributed and provided to all regardless of caste differences, care providers discriminate with the Dalits when they need health services. The communication between the care providers and seekers hardly takes place since Dalits are categorized as service class people and therefore, they do not deserve to be served. Non-Dalit health workers discriminate with Dalits in communities especially in educational and health institutions. KM Polit (2005) has highlighted the problems faced by Dalit women in South Asia. The Dalit women lack freedom to travel from one place to other. Generally, they are confined to the marriage institution and serve their men and non-Dalits for survival. They have a very limited chance for mobility. Due to lack of mobility, they can neither get education nor do they receive health services. As a result, they suffer both lack of knowledge and poor health. They often become the victims of sexual harassment in male-dominated society. Hence Dalit women face the shortage of opportunities for social mobility, education and health for their bright future. Dalit women in the plain of Nepal have more problems and challenges than those who reside in the urban areas and hilly region of Nepal as the access to education for women in the urban and hilly settlements is higher than that in the plain.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated the connection between caste and people's access to education in Nepal. The caste system is intricately embedded in the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of people's lives throughout the country. The research has found that caste directly influences an individual's access to education and creates various challenges for those who are from the Dalit community. Dalits, often referred to as lower castes, frequently face discrimination in societal institutions. Even educators from the so-called higher castes have discriminated with children from the Dalit community in academic institutions. Children from the so-called upper castes have more opportunities for personal development and recreational activities compared to those from Dalit families. This clear discrimination exists in nearly all social structures throughout the nation. Historically, the Dalits have been left out of formal education and, in many instances, they have been segregated in schools. This segregation has terribly affected their mental status and consequently, they have failed

to perform well. They have been regarded as unclean and unapproachable. In numerous ceremonial and religious practices, they have not been permitted to take part. There are many cases reported where Dalits and their children are violently attacked if they engage in public matters and events. Children from the so-called upper castes have had greater access and opportunities regarding infrastructure and social networks compared to children from the Dalit community. Due to these challenges, children from Dalit families face various obstacles to education and other avenues for personal and professional development in life. Discrimination and stigma based on caste create a hostile environment in schools for students from Dalit families. In numerous instances, educators, classmates, and students from different grades within schools, along with school administrators in some situations, strengthen caste-based biases. As a result, students from the so-called lower castes do not achieve success in their career. In schools, bullying, harassment, insults, and boycotts stemming from caste differences are prevalent, making children from Dalit families particularly susceptible. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to focus on the implementation of the policies and constitutional provisions that ensure equal opportunities and access to all children regardless of their caste identity.

References

- Ambedkar, B. R. (2011). *Caste in India*. Nagpur: Prabuddha Bhart Pustkalya.
- Chalaune, Bhawan Singh (2020). Dalit Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Caste-Based Discrimination in Nepalese Schools. *International Journal of Research-GRANTHAALAYAH*, 8(8), 147—154, <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v8.i8.20.977>
- Jodhka, S. S. (2016). Ascriptive Hierarchies: Caste and Its Reproduction in Contemporary India. *Current Sociology (Monograph Series)* 64 (2), pp. 228—43.
- Limbu, Sangita Thebe (2021, June). The Making of the English-Speaking Nepali Citizens: Intersectionality of Class, Caste, Ethnicity and Gender in Private Schools. *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 26(1). 65—96, Mandala Book Point.
- Ojha, Ghanashyam (2017, December). Do Education and Caste Matter for Political Representation in Nepal? *South Asian Journal of Policy and Governance*, 41(2), 75—92.
- Polit, KM (2005). The Effects of Inequality and Relative Marginality on the Well-being of Low Caste People in Central Uttaranchal. *Anthropology Med*, 12, 225—237.
- UNESCO (2013). *Country Programming Document for Nepal, 2011-2013*.
- Verma S, Acharya SS (2018). Social Identity and Perceptions about Health Care Service Provisioning by and for the Dalits in India. *Social Identities*, 24, 327—338.