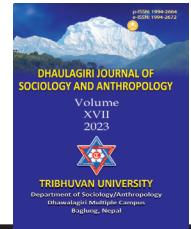


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# Politics of Marginalization: How Caste Affects Political Career of Dalits in Nepal

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**Article Info**

Received: November 23, 2023

Revised received: March 19, 2024

Accepted: April 14, 2024

Available online: June 30, 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v18i01.67552>**Abstract**

Dalit leadership thrives only on the inclusive policies and practices of political parties in a diversified society. This study explores how the caste system affects the political career of Dalits in Nepal by means of the author's autoethnography and in-depth interviews taken with Dalit political leaders and activists. The study reveals that the caste system plays a key role in accessing and controlling the power politics of Dalit leaders and activists. The influence of caste prevails among political parties, from grassroots to top leadership. The high-caste domination is not only prevalent in the institutional structures of conventional parties but also in the communist parties. Besides, the Dalit politicians have frequently faced untouchability from non-Dalits while conducting party activities in their parties, and private and public spaces. To overcome the caste hegemony, this paper suggests the deconstruction of the caste system that will lead to the liberation of Dalits.

*Keywords:* caste, dalit exclusion, liberation, political participation

**Introduction**

This paper explores the role of caste system in creating and inhibiting the political space of Dalit<sup>1</sup> leaders/cadres in Nepal. The caste system is widely practiced in South Asian societies, including Nepali societies. The question of caste has gained some degree of attention in the public discourse in Nepal especially after the political change of 2006 marked by the ending of Maoist insurgency and the monarchy. The issue of caste had gained some attention even before 2006. Particularly, the people's war led by

CPN (Maoist) from 1996 to 2006, more assertive Dalit movements, civil society movements after the restoration of democracy in 1990, and the expansion of education have contributed to the inclusion and exclusion discourse based on caste. The changed political landscape ensured a few inclusive policies for marginalized people. The names of excluded groups, like women, Dalits, Janajatis, and others, are mentioned in the constitution of political parties, but there is a huge gap between the promises and translating them into practices, particularly in leadership positions (Hachhethu, 2022). In this changing context, my concern is how caste functions in access to and control over the political power mechanisms from Dalit leaders/cadres.

Many studies (Bista, 1994; Ambedkar, 2018; Aahuti, 2014) have highlighted that the caste system is built on the principles of the Hindu religion that prioritizes Brahmanism. This ideology has spoiled society by dividing it into those with purity and impurity and those with higher

1. Dalit community refers to the untouchable caste groups in south Asia. According to National Dalit Commission (NDC, 2011), Dalit community are backward in social, economic, educational, political and religious spheres and deprived from human dignity and social justice due to caste based discrimination and untouchability. There are altogether 26 castes in Dalit community in Nepal.

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and lower ranks. The major motive of the caste system was to capture the power and resources of the state by the dominating caste groups (Subedi, 2013). The control over the power, resources, and knowledge by the 'upper caste' elites persists till today.

Political parties are the key instruments to navigate democracy. Inclusive democracy recognizes ethnic identity by seeking equality among unequal groups (Hachhetu, 2022). Dalit community had aspired for democracy that could soothe the balm over the wounds created by the caste system. However, the limited democracy from 1990 to 2006 remained pathetic for Dalits. It did not heal the wounds of the caste system. Mahendra Lawati (2008) defines Nepali democracy as exclusionary democratization. He further explains:

The representation of Dalits in all three institutions was nil in 1959 and after 40 years they were still nil in 1999. The extreme exclusion prevalent in Nepal can be better understood through the example of the Dalit. Not a single Dalit was made a minister during the entire period of 1990–2002. Except for one representative in the teaching and academic professional associations leadership and four members of the Upper House of the Parliament, a powerless institution, there was no Dalit in any leadership position in the influential ten social, political, and economic sectors. (p. 370)

The democratic transition failed to be inclusive mainly because political parties were unwilling to represent and articulate the demands of less powerful caste groups. To minimize the gap between historical injustice and violence over the Dalit community, the constitution of Nepal 2015 has the provision for making political leadership mandatorily inclusive. Political parties need to comply with the provisions of the constitution and laws. However, the exclusion series persists from the local level to the federal governance system.

In Nepal, so-called 'upper caste' people have long enjoyed access to state resources and power. Because of the control and historical domination of the so-called 'upper caste' in political institutions and leadership, Dalits are excluded from meaningfully participating and exercising their democratic rights (Bishwokarma, 2016). Even after the political movement of 2006, the ruling power of the state remains with the so-called upper castes, i.e., Bahun, Chhetri, and some indigenous nationalities, and they have captured the economy, culture, education, and development sectors, including politics (Nepali, 2019).

The existing caste politics-related literature (Kharel, 2010; BK, 2013; Dumont, 1980) have focused on the debate of identity politics as well as the issue of purity and impurity. However, these studies have paid little attention to the relationship between the caste system and political participation, focusing on Dalits. The major concern I'm trying to highlight in this study is how caste plays a role in shaping the political careers of Dalits in Hindu society<sup>2</sup>.

How the caste system goes along with the political power-holding process is a prime concern of this research. This study contributes to the contemporary inclusive and equitable political discourse in Nepal. With the brief introductory part, this study shortly explains methods and discusses the results to reach the conclusion.

## Methodology

This research applies critical theory (Willis et al, 2007). As the Dalit issue connects with oppression, historical injustice, and marginalization, the critical paradigm is relevant. The study was conducted in the capital city, Kathmandu, as it is the center of power politics and has a high concentration of party head offices, including Dalit and other leaders. So far, I have included respondents based on their diversity of gender, castes, political background, and ecological zones.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach as it gives detailed information of individuals about their experiences and ideas (Creswell, 2007). It also allows us to enter the other person's perspective. In addition, this research employs autoethnography, which seeks to describe and analyze personal experience and challenges traditional established ways of conducting research and treats research as a political, socially just, and conscious act (Ellis et al., 2011). This is the only possible, and indeed the most authentic, way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place as personal experiences and narratives bring out the reality in a striking way (Ilaiyah, 2002). I have used autoethnography to reflect my individual experiences as I came from the Dalit community and have engaged in political activism from the grassroots level to the national level. Eight in-depth interviews with the central committee members of national political parties were conducted. The participants were selected purposively, maintaining the diversity of gender, castes, political background, ecological zones, and provincial criteria.

As per collected data from field level and desk review, I analyzed them broadly based on research questions. The study combined the generic steps described by Creswell (2007) and Marshall and Rossman (1999) and modified them in the research. It entailed classifying events, daily activities, persons and other information collected in line with my objectives and analyzing them in appropriate coherence of research argument. I also used the narrative analysis of collected data through interviews and self-reflections to reformulate stories presented by respondents in different contexts. Finally, I interpreted the whole primary data triangulating with reviewed literature.

by the then restored House of Representatives. The Constitution of Nepal, 2015 has also defined Nepal as a secular state. However, the Hindu norms, values and practices of caste based discrimination are widely prevalent in the country.

2. Nepal was declared a secular state on 15<sup>th</sup> of January, 2007

## Result and Discussion

The Constitution of Nepal, 2015, came into existence addressing a few mandates of the Maoist insurgency and the April People's Uprising of 2006. As per the preamble and Article 4 of this constitution, we are bound to practice inclusive and participatory democracy inclined to socialist models. The key meaning of this system is to ensure the participation of all castes and groups of people, at least based on their proportionate population. Article 40 (1) of the constitution clearly defines:

The Dalit shall have the right to participate in all bodies of the state on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion. Special provision shall be made by law for the empowerment, representation and participation of the Dalit community in public services as well as other sectors of employment. (p. 25)

Surprisingly, the political parties of Nepal led by Bahun and Chhetri leaders have defined the provision of the constitution as per their interests and comforts. They hardly fulfilled the proportionate quotas and neglected the participation of Dalits in the first past-the-post system (Nepali, 2019). This has ridiculed and weakened the participation of Dalits according to rights documented in the constitution and election laws (House of Representatives Election Act 2017; Provincial Assembly Representatives Election Act 2017; Local Level Election Act 2017). In this context, this paper explores how the caste system is working in changed political set up of Nepal.

In fact, the major organs of the state are affected by exclusionary practices. Though the presence of Dalit women looks satisfactory in the ward committees, only three mayors and eight deputy mayors are elected out of a total of 293 seats. Similarly, six chairs and seven vice chairs are elected out of the total village municipality 460 seats. Altogether, 148 ward chairs were elected from the whole Dalit community out of the total 6,743 seats of the local level mechanism in 2022. In the province parliament, 31 Dalit parliamentarians were elected out of a total of 550 seats. Likewise, altogether 16 Dalit parliamentarians are elected out of the total 275 seats in the 2022 election of HoR. In the national assembly, 7 Dalit representatives are elected (Election Commission 2022). In the executive structure, this situation is more embarrassing with only one Dalit in the state ministry out of 25 members' ministry of council. The executive governments of provincial and local levels have also the same situation with nominal participation of Dalits. Whereas, as per the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2011) Dalit population is 13.8 percent. Nevertheless, the Dalit civil society claims that the population of Dalit is over 20 percent (Bhattachan, 2009). This is against the proportional inclusion provision defined in the Constitution of Nepal. The following portion explains the Dalit participation scenario in the party politics of Nepal.

## Dalit Participation in the Political Parties of Nepal

In a democratic as well as a socialist system, political parties play a vital role in running the state systems. Particularly, parties reach the governing position through periodic elections in a democratic system. As Nepal is following up the parliamentary democratic system, political parties are key driving factors in formulating laws, forming government, and conducting the overall mechanism of the state. As a fundamental right to form political parties ensured by the Constitution of Nepal, 132 political parties are registered in the Election Commission as of 23rd September 2020. These parties are formed to take part in elections as defined in national laws. Some political parties are not registered in the Election Commission as those parties have taken the strategic objectives of forming an alternative system instead of the existing parliamentary system in the country.

Looking at the political parties lists of Nepal, only 7 parties<sup>3</sup> are headed by Dalit leaders. To reflect the dominance of the caste system in political parties, I have looked at the representation of caste, gender, and region in national political parties.<sup>4</sup> Only three parties namely, Nepal Communist Party (CPN)<sup>5</sup>, Nepali Congress (NC) and Janata Samajbadi Party (JaSaPa) were able to be the national parties in the election of 2017.

The central committee of a party is supposed to be the supreme mechanism of making decisions and implementing them in the respective areas. A central committee member of a party can play a leading role in selecting candidates for election to the appointment of various bodies of government along with wider networking with people. As the decisions of the party go with the majority winning system, all the committee members of different caste backgrounds do their best to influence the party.

The following bar diagram clearly shows the hold of so-called 'upper caste' people in the national parties of Nepal. In the ruling party, CPN<sup>6</sup>, out of the 448 members of the party central committee, 43.5 percent is covered by Bahun, and Dalit remains at the bottom, comprising only 4.9 percent. The second largest and opposition party, NC, also encompasses 40 percent Bahun out of its 115

3. Bahujan Shakti Party, Nepal Dalit Party, Nepal Matribhumi Party, Saamajik Ekata Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Nepal and Scientific Socialist Communist Party of Nepal.

4. The National Party has to garner three percent vote each under the Proportional Representation category and at least one seat under the First-Past-the-Post system to be recognized as national parties as per section 52 of Political Party Act, 2017.

5. Nepal Communist Party (CPN) has been split into two sections after dissolution of the House of Representatives on 20 December 2020. Both split factions of the party have claimed the authorized name of the party so that I have included the previous unified party for this study.

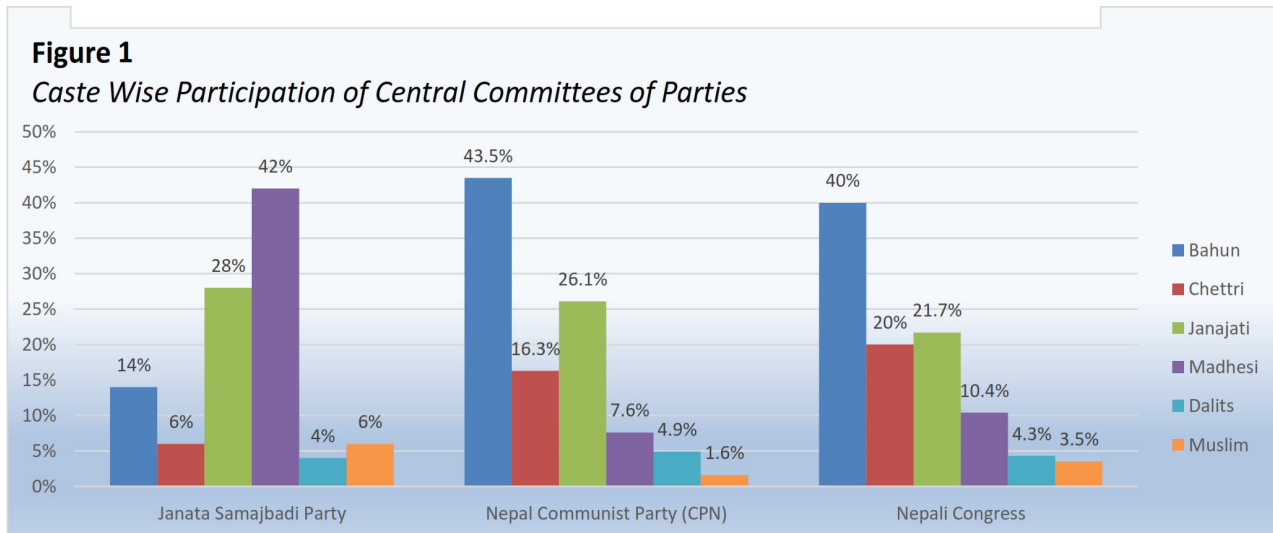
6. Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) was formed on 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 2018 after the merger of CPN (UML) and CPN (MC).

members of the central committee, and Dalits stay at the bottom with 4.3 percent. JaSaPa was formed through the merger of two Madhesh-based parties, the Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Party, on 22 April 2020. Out of 778 central committee members, 42 percent are bagged by Madhesis but at the bottom Dalits with 4 percent.

Looking at the inter Dalit and Dalit women participation, CPN includes 18 hill Dalits and only four Madheshi Dalits out of a total of 22 Dalit central committee members. Among them, five hill Dalit women and only one Madheshi Dalit woman were represented in the central committee.

in its central committee. In JaSaPa, 25 hill Dalits and 10 Madheshi Dalits were included among 35 Dalit central committee members. Out of the total Dalit members, five hill Dalit women and two Madheshi Dalit women participated in the central committee of the party. One each hill Dalit male and female got a chance to participate in the top executive position of 50 members in the party.

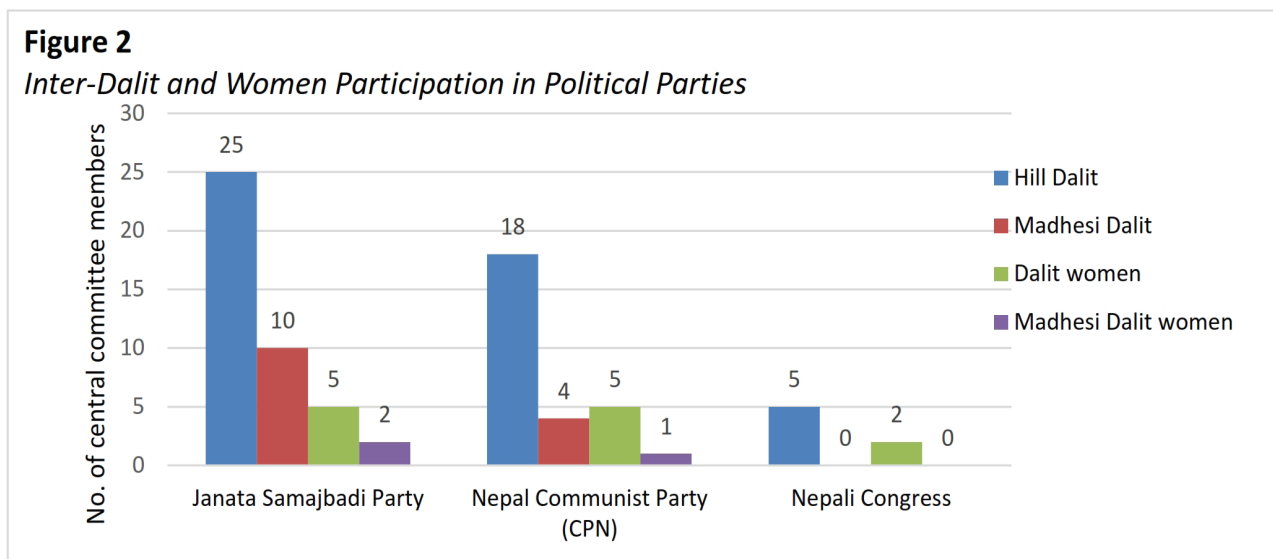
Going through the data on overall representation in national political parties, a wider gap can be noticed in their central-level committees. Each national party has shrunk to below five percent in terms of Dalit representation.



Source: Field survey, 2020

A Dalit member was included in Standing Committee out

Whereas Bahun dominates with triple and half percent representation in the ruling party, including its opposition.



Source: Field Survey, 2020

of its top 45 members. Likewise, NC included only five hill Dalit members and out of them, two were hill Dalit women

This over-representation reaches up to double that of the newly unified JaSaPa. Chhetris slightly over-represented

in CPN and NC but under-represented in JaSaPa. Other remaining caste, ethnic and religious groups are underrepresented compared to their population. The national political parties not only reflect the gap of caste/ethnic/religious representation but also gender presence in their respective parties. Out of 448 central committees of CPN, only 69 women presented in the party. Of 115 NC central committee members, only 17 women were presented. Similarly, only 105 women got a chance to participate in the 778 members' central committee of JaSaPa.

The aforesaid data clearly reveals the roles of caste in the political participation of national parties. As far as we go to the top rank of these political parties, the more vertical hierarchy applies in every institution of the parties. Most often, the top body of the party is involved in the decision-making processes. But the central committee is the most significant body to take every critical decision and make policies of the party. When marginalized sections like Dalits get excluded from these spaces of party, then their agenda and community lag behind in overall conditions. In this way, the robust persistence of so-called 'upper caste people' in the party politics of Nepal has been continuously marginalizing Dalits in key decision-making and implementation mechanisms even though the state adopted some inclusive policies. I have linked how the issue of representation applies in the life of a party through my autoethnography.

### **How Caste Affects the Political Career of Dalits: An Auto-Ethnographic Insight**

The birth of a person in a certain caste group determines many things, including political career. As I was born in a Dalit family in a remote western hill district of Nepal, my entire life journey has been influenced by the caste. Though my village is located in the panoramic Dhaulagiri Himalaya and Ghumte Hill, my ancestors spent the most difficult and destitute life in a hut remaining at the top of a cliff surrounded by forests. The village comprises 95 percent of Chhetris and five percent of Dalits. Among Dalits, Sarki and Kami live.

As caste gets started to exclude the so-called lower castes then life of them goes through multifaceted troubles. Since the production land was not sufficient for two months, my father was bonded as Haliya in a Jiwuwal family. We did not have milk-giving cows in our shed, so we used to visit the doors of Chhettris to beg for whey. The Chhetri people would pour the whey cautiously into our galleon. By the way, if the pot happened to touch us, we had to wash up the pot and dry it up. Only then the pot can be taken into their kitchen. During work at their house, we were given food outside the house and needed to clean up eating pots and dry them out. While fetching drinking water, we had to wait until the last turn as we were not allowed to touch their pots. Bearing all these discriminations, we were able to resolve our hand-to-mouth problems in the village.

The autocratic Panchayat era from 1960 to 1990 became a fertile land to further dominate the Dalits. During the Panchayat era, the so-called high castes held powerful positions (Jimuwal and Mukhiya) in the village. They were generally held by the same family lineage. The village Kachahari<sup>7</sup> would reach the final decision through the words of these elites. It was very difficult to raise the voice of the Dalit community. These people were just passive listeners and followers of the meetings in the village. My family was one of the Dalit families who never violated the instructions of those elites.

I got a chance to observe the ascribed roles of politics for so-called 'upper caste people' at the end of the Panchayat era. The ward chair and members of the Village Development Committee (VDC) were from the Chhetri caste. During the conversations with Dalits at that time, they would try to convince me that doing politics was the job of the upper caste, which was set up in previous birth. The responses would surprise me. The poor Dalits of my village did not have time to think over the politics apart from voting for any candidate referred to by the 'upper caste' cadre.

Like many other Dalit students, I faced caste-based discrimination at school, which negatively affected my education. Most of my classmates used to humiliate me using caste-indicating derogatory words and pushing me from the bench on the cold and dusty floor. One day, an 'upper caste girl' blamed me for stealing her earrings, and then, the teacher came to me and scolded indicating caste without any inquiry, and kicked me many times. Due to this incident, I dropped out of school for more than one year.

'Upper caste teachers' with castiest mentality harassed Dalit students to block their education. When I was studying in class seven, a social study teacher frequently tortured me, naming my caste and color, though a few teachers encouraged me to study. As all the teachers were from 'upper caste' background, I faced discrimination many times i.e. during the tiffin time, Saraswoti worship and so on. It was gradually normalized in public spaces but, continues my village and private spaces.

### **Involvement in Student and Party Politics**

The most attractive thing to me in politics was: "Communists do not follow caste systems and do establish equality". The whole district was influenced by the communist stream. At first, I was influenced by the progressive songs of Raktim Pariwar and involved in the team. When I was studying in grade eight, the impact of the Maoist movement began in our school. I used to discuss them on the burning issues of students. The more radical and different ideas than the previous communist parties made my friends and me to form a student committee in

7. The gathering of people to decide any public issues in the village.

the village.

Maoists had targeted Dalits to get involved in their movement. In the beginning stage, we used to be surprised when talking about Maoist guerillas. One evening in 1998 summer, two Maoist combatants visited my house and shook hands with me. From that day, different Maoist leaders, cadres, and combatants made our house their shelter. They used to orient and train about the relevancy of the Maoist revolt and its inevitable victory. For this purpose, they would force me to leave bourgeois education and be involved in full-time politics. They tried to convince me that it was the main role of Dalit people to move forward the Maoist movement and that there was no alternative apart from this.

The caste-based discrimination I faced in my school, during wedding parties and other occasions in my village enabled me to take part in the violent Maoist movement. Maoists used to convince me that the war was targeted to destroy the caste system and make a just society for all oppressed castes and classes. During the Maoist campaign, I did not face any caste-based discrimination. However, in my village, the casteist behavior of upper-caste people, especially the people of older generations, continued.

I became the main focus of Maoists in the areas as I was from a Dalit community with some education. I was promoted quickly in the party committees, from the village level committee to school committees and then area committees. In 2000, I worked as the chair of the student organization of the area committee. Finally, I was nominated as the sub-secretary of the district in All Nepal National Student Union (Revolutionary). This exposed me as a district student leader among the masses as well as among adversary state forces. The Maoists pressured me to be a whole-time cadre. One student leader of a vital position in the central level committee said in a district meeting, "We have to carry grenades in our back and books at our hands while we are at the school." All the student members had dropped the study and declared themselves as whole-time cadres in the district committee.

With the upgrade to the student organization, my party portfolio also naturally went up. When I was committed to the vital position of the district committee of students, I was awarded the party area committee member. Later on, I got the responsibility of the party in-charge of my VDC. Whenever I reached the upper position of the party, I felt the caste influence to form and reform organizations including participation in state mechanisms. I reached the secretary of state coordinating committee till the peace process. Coming to this point, the party committee clearly reflected its caste dominance.

### **Forms of Discrimination Faced**

Caste would have blocked most of the activities conducted in the village and surrounding area because I was familiar with my caste tag among them. The young

generation who became aware through the latest schooling (including the Maoist movement) did not care about the caste. However, the older generations were much more sensitive to caste in the area.

The most prone zone of caste discrimination is the zone of dining. Maoists used to 'take name' at the time of calling and in the documents, too. One of the easy ways to escape caste was this 'take name.' The people of higher caste never dare to ask the caste (Thar) of Maoist cadres. Many villagers tried to skip providing food due to the issue of caste, so Maoists would go to Dalit houses to have food. It would be much more difficult to have food together in the familiar houses. Besides one house, other households in my village never accepted me having food together entering their house. When I began work in the Kathmandu valley after the peace process, the caste issue was frequently raised, though we used 'take name'.

Another probable area of caste discrimination during the Maoist movement was sheltering. Due to caste issues, the house owners would prefer to manage shelter in the shed and outer part of the house as far as possible. I have many discriminatory examples while taking shelter and food. During the full-time politics of Kathmandu, I was assigned my working area in Kirtipur. Occasionally, I would take shelter at a Bahun family who was also the secretary of ward level party committee. Later, I was informed that he purified his house having Rudri after knowing my caste background. When I talked to him on this issue, he was speechless with a blush face.

The most recurring incident of caste discrimination would happen while holding meetings. Most of the non-Dalit cadres used to skip from organizing meetings in their house. The meetings that would be held in non-Dalit houses were kept separate from their kitchen and inner part of the houses. The comrades would come outside taking food and join with Dalits to show their determination towards revolution. They would request with Dalit cadres to consider their older parents and grandparents. [Aahuti \(2014\)](#) also shares his experiences of caste-based discrimination while conducting meetings in the party's local committees. He frequently faced compulsion to sit outside the room of non-Dalits to read the circulars of the party. For this cause, most party meetings would be conducted in Dalit's houses.

My caste identity became the main cause of revenge during the conflict period. We conducted a local alcohol-eradicating campaign in the summer of 2001. Most of the Chhetri households were involved in the local alcohol-making profession. We flung away the Jaanda (alcohol-making materials) and collected all the alcohol-making pots. Some Dalits also entered the house of Chhetris to take out the hidden pots and Jaanda. Few Chhetris were very angry with this campaign, especially with the entry of Dalits into their houses. When the emergency period began after the Maoist attack on the Royal Nepal Armies (RNA), the RNAs were deployed in the area. The same Chhetris

person spied on RNA, indicating me as a Maoist leader during the inquiry meeting with the then army chief. The security forces arrested me and kept me for 16 days in a barrack with heavy physical and mental torture.

### Participation and Upgrade in Party Hierarchy

Though the party prioritized to include Dalits in People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Maoist Army, and caste/ethnic front organizations, the party was under the hold of 'upper caste people'. The party committee was supposed to be the vanguard of the proletariat class. Unfortunately, the most oppressed people, like Dalits, could not get a chance to hold this vanguard during and after the conflict period. The larger part of the cadres was highly motivated to stand at the forefront by taking part in PLA. A beautiful dream of liberation from multiple forms of oppression was injected into the minds of these marginalized sections. As organizations were formed on a chain of command systems, all the cadres were fully dependent on the instruction and decisions of the party headquarters.

When the party entered the peace process, the dominance and irregularities of party headquarters were exposed outside. Looking at leadership, very few leaders were found upgraded in the party central committee and the high command of PLA. The focus of the party shifted from Dalits and other marginalized sections to non-Dalits and the new opportunist elites. Eventually, the original face of casteism was revealed in the party. Major powerful positions, including headquarters, were captured by Bahuns and other 'upper caste' people, and Dalits reached the bottom.

On 10<sup>th</sup> December 2012, the UCPN (Maoist) Republican Special Organizing Committee had an assembly for regional committee formation. I had registered my candidacy for the secretary position. The high concentration of Bahuns/Chhetris could easily elect the new Bahun leaders. Fortunately, I was elected due to my long contribution to the party and seniority. However, I had to face many troubles while conducting the regular activities of the party due to these imbalances. In this way, we see a clear contrast between the two periods, i.e., between the conflict period and during the peace process. During wartime, Dalits were kept on the priority list of Maoists for standing at the forefront of various confrontations. After being in the peace process, the Dalit participation began to shrink day by day and converted into a voting bank.

My observation also exposes the dominating roles of Bahun-Chhetris in political parties and state power. Even the so-called communist and revolutionary parties do not have Dalit leaders in their vital positions. And it is impossible to find a party led by Dalit leaders in Nepal. Those who are getting chance to remain in the political parties are compelled to have buttering and flattering of their Bahun-Chhetri leaders for securing their positions in

the party. A kind of unseen structural violence is ongoing over the Dalit community. In this paper, I have looked at how other Dalit leaders experienced caste in their political profession in the following section.

### The Factors of Political Marginalization: Experiences from Dalit Activists

In this section, how caste has shaped the trajectory of Dalit activists and leaders is analyzed based on in-depth interviews. The key motivations for involving in politics from Dalit community were caste-based oppression and other inequalities. Amrit<sup>8</sup> worked as executive director of Dalit Development Board (DDB) appointed from CPN. He shares his experiences of involving in political party in the following way:

I was in love with a neighboring Bahun girl since when I was in class seven. Our nine-year long love affair broke up due to caste in 2054 B.S. In the same year, I had rented a room in the house of a man surnamed Bhattarai in Kathmandu. My mother rang me on the house owner's phone and revealed my caste unintentionally to the landlord. Then he pressured me to leave the room. One day in 2058 B.S., I was invited to a wedding ceremony of a friend. In the same wedding party, the chief of the Chitwan Science College where I used to teach came and persuaded the upper caste people to boycott me. These bitter experiences of discrimination propelled me to involve the Maoist insurgency.

Pratima<sup>9</sup> a central committee member of JaSaPa, came to politics from the most excluded Dalit community of Nepal. Her father inspired her to get involved in politics. He used to convince her, "The upper caste (Brahmins) will never allow us to get involved in politics. We should educate our family and get them involved in politics." With her father's motivation, Pratima questioned the party elites and got space in NC.

As Dalit Maoist leaders assured her to involve in the party for special rights of Dalits, then she left NC and joined Dalit Liberation Front. In an underground meeting of the committee, she said, "I will not become a stooge of the upper-caste leaders my dad did. If you are really committed towards proletariat class, then I will be a campaigner." The leaders of the meeting convinced her to go the same path and she involved in Maoist movement.

Makunda<sup>10</sup>, the vice chair of Dalit Sangh, has many experiences of discrimination in his political life. He never got a chance to come into a vital position apart from the village unit chair in 2048 B.S. He argues that the contemporary persons from Bahun and Chhetri are in vital positions and hold powerful positions in state. However, his roles were restricted to Dalit organizations of party but

8. Amrit was interviewed on 31st May, 2020 in his flat at Baneshwor.

9. Pratima was interviewed on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2020 at Baluwatar.

10. Makunda was interviewed via cell phone on 1st June 2020.

political appointments in government institutions.

As Pratima was nominated to the central committee of Dalit Sangh, a few leaders of Kami and Damai complained to her, "How did the organization pick her directly up to this level? The time has not yet come to take Dom at the central level". The same type of discrimination repeated working in the Maoist party. During the first constituent assembly (CA) election, the party had listed her name at the top of the proportional rank. When the day came to finalize the list, she was removed. She asked the party leader to explain why she was removed from the list. They responded that she could not contribute properly due to her delivery case.

According to Bishwokarma (2016), "Tokenism has prevailed more in recent times, particularly after the enforcement of the inclusion policy in 2006" (p. 11). This manifests the nomination either by quota or just as a token in the political mechanism, which can be seen as pseudo-participation. When Dalit representatives are deliberately excluded from the decision-making level, they get converted into 'rubber stamps' just to fulfil the political interests of the so-called 'upper caste'.

When the party was divided, and organizations reached weaker conditions, Pratima proposed to work as the chair of the Dalit organization with a determination to revive the organization in a stronger position. But, Kamis never accepted the proposal due to the internal hierarchy of castes among Dalits<sup>11</sup> and settled her in the vice chair of the organization. So, she argues that Bahunism and Manuism prevails not only in the overall politics but equally dreadful in the internal politics of Dalits. In terms of social networks and connections, Bimala<sup>12</sup> explains:

There is a very big obstacle for the Dalit community to establish itself politically. As the caste system divided the society in such a way that there exists no awareness that people should cooperate and organize. Since Dalit community is deprived of all the powers and forced to accept slavery, there is little awareness among them that they should organize and revolt. A little bit of consciousness has developed now. But this awareness does not reach politics of Dalit uprising.

My respondents shared with me many stories of caste discrimination they faced while they served the party. Some of their key experiences are presented hereunder: In 2064, I was elected as the vice president of a district committee of the Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxist Leninist (UML), a leftist party. Casteism was such an acute condition while going to some training and programs of parties and others, they would praise me, 'It is wow.' But if I wanted to stay overnight at

their homes, I had to find a Dalit house. Where can I find a family who would host me after meeting and training till 12 o'clock at night? Such discrimination existed in the Communist Party. Not much has changed even now." shares Mira<sup>13</sup>. Her complexities involved in politics due to caste. She further mentions another case of discrimination, "Time and again, this society shows its caste face. The eighth convention of party was held in Butwal in 2055 B.S. Unexpectedly, I won the convention representative by five votes. Basanti Bhandari who had already won the ward member, resigned from the party saying that 'Dumini', who comes to pick up crops at my house, won the representative."

However, Amrit did not face any discrimination during the Maoist people war. However, he faced discrimination after coming to the peace process. Pratima also experiences a massive influence of the caste system in party politics. She is not satisfied with her political career as she has been made as a dummy to collect votes for the party. She strongly questions, "When can we reach the decisive positions for our issues and policies? Few Dalit leaders are taken in the vital position of the party too. But are their voices heard in the party?" When working in the Naya Shakti Party, a party formed by the second most influential Maoist leader during the Maoist insurgency, or who is often recognized as the ideologue of the insurgency, Baburam Bhattarai, high caste dominance was in the whole party, including Kamis from Dalit. She strongly criticized it and corrected it later on, consulting with the party coordinator. Such struggles contributed to the inclusion of diversified groups in the party and its organizations.

When the agenda of Dalits is not heard in the party, then movement needs to open. The interviewees have focused on the joint Dalit movement for six million Dalits. As far as the Dalits are lured to the power led by Bahuns for their vested interests, Dalit liberation looks always impossible.

Based on the empirical data, we can see the vital roles of caste factors in shaping the political career-making of Dalits in Nepal. Dalit leaders and cadres have faced caste-based discrimination while having food, taking shelter, and holding meetings after exposing their caste identity. Caste is also equally vibrant in the upgrade of positions in the party, selection of candidates in elections, and taking government power. The casteist mindset and ego are ingrained even in Dalit organizations and practices of radical communist parties. Another important factor, caste oppression, pushed the Dalit community to involve people in war and other movements. To some extent, the social networks of Dalits expanded but were not sufficient to jointly organize and agitate due to a lack of awareness.

The wave of globalization blended with socialism has enhanced the agency of Dalits to enter into politics to some

11. Kamis are in the upper echelon of the caste hierarchy within the Dalits, and they consider other castes such as Sarki and Damai in the Hills as lower than them.

12. Bimala is politbureau level member from one of the Madhesh based Parties of Nepal. She was interviewed on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2022 as an in-depth interviewee.

13. Mira is politbureau member from one of the Communist Parties of Nepal. She was interviewed on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2022 as an in-depth interviewee.



extent. Particularly, the socio-political movements have enhanced Dalits for their political participation. Though such movements have promoted inclusive politics, the substantive inclusion issues are left behind. In this case, the annihilation of the caste system is necessary to contribute to the real liberation of Dalits from structural violence and injustice. The proportional representation, along with the compensation of historical exclusion and injustice, is to be the immediate strategy to move ahead from this point.

### Conclusion

The political parties of Nepal exclude and discriminate against Dalit community despite their promises. As per the preamble and article four of the Constitution of Nepal, we are bound to ensure the participation of all caste groups, at least based on their proportionate population. Surprisingly, the political parties of Nepal led by Bahun and Chhetri leaders have defined the provision of the constitution as per their interests and comforts. Political parties have completely neglected the participation of Dalits in first-past-the-post system. Looking at the latest data of national political parties for this study, Dalits have been highly excluded and are not provided proportionate representation. This has ridiculed and weakened the participation of Dalits as per Nepali constitution and election laws.

In the Nepali social structure, being the so-called upper caste is quite comfortable for engaging in politics and access to state resources and power. The ruling power of the state is still in the hands of so-called upper castes, i.e., Bahuns, Chhetri, and some indigenous nationalities. These ruling classes have captured the power of state and political parties. A few Dalits have just begun to be represented in the party organizations and state structures. However, they are not at the powerful decision-making level. As a result, most Dalits are out of access to and control over the political power of state mechanisms.

The empirical data of this study also clearly indicates that caste has been a dominant factor in shaping political participation. It prevails in every layer of party committees to the whole wings of the system. Casteism remains not only in the old feudalistic and orthodox parties but also in the communist parties of Nepal. Moreover, the leftist parties are highly dominated by Bahuns and constantly exclude Dalits from the process of participation and limit them in their caste-based organizations and state mechanisms. From making the party constitution to deciding the position is dominated by non-Dalits. There are very less empowerment and caste eradication campaigns in the parties of Nepal. As a result, structural violence over Dalit community continues. The most critical thing, the caste system carries hegemony of 'upper caste rulers'. This hegemony has prepared fertile land to sustain the caste-based politics over Dalits. The strategy of caste system has again suppressed Dalits through the reformed patron-client relations of capitalism. So, the critical empowerment of

Dalits is necessary for deconstructing the caste structure and making equitable participation and effective roles of them in the state apparatus.

### Declarations

#### Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate:

This study was conducted as part of my MPhil research at Nepal Open University. The research committee at the university approved the study, and consent was obtained from participants before conducting interviews.

#### Consent for Publication:

Not applicable

#### Availability of Data and Materials:

Data can be share

#### Competing Interests:

There are no competing interests in this study.

#### Funding:

No funding for this study

#### Acknowledgments:


I acknowledge to TU Grassroots Community and one of its initiator Shyam Sharma, an associate professor of Stony Brook University. I am also grateful to professor and entire team of Nepal Open University for supporting me to shape this research work.

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