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## UNVEILING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY DALIT CHILDREN IN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS OF NEPAL

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### ABSTRACT

The Dalit community, is economically exploited, educationally backwards, socially excluded, politically voiceless, psychologically dominated and marginalized in Nepal. The Dalit children are facing a myriad of challenges in acquiring education from and within school. Such sufferings range from community to school, and so far up to higher education. In this context, this study intends to explore the challenges they face in school while acquiring education from and within the community school of Nepal. Qualitative research, along with interpretative phenomenological approach, was employed in this study. A total of eight Dalit students, comprising four Madhesi Dalit (Risidev, Santal, Das, Paswan) and four Pahade Dalit (Biswokarma, Pariyar, Sarki, Gandarva) from secondary levels of community schools located in Morang district, were purposively selected as participants for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants via semi-structured interview guidelines. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The thematic analysis techniques were used to analyze the data. The study revealed that the Dalit students faced several challenges, such as administrative challenges, bullying, negative labelling, underestimation, unfriendly behavior, unfair treatment and poor motivation for education. This study implicates policymakers and education planners in making a strategy for setting non-discriminatory practices in education that promotes an equitable and inclusive society.

**Keywords:** Dalit tribe, verna system, staff domination, emancipation and liberation, equitable and inclusive society

## INTRODUCTION

Dalit people are a group of people who are untouchable and socially exploited, culturally excluded, psychologically dominated, and politically voiceless for centuries (NDC). Dalit people are backward in social, economic, political, and religious fields. They are deprived of human dignity and social justice (Bishwakarma, 2009). Dalit people are considered lower caste under the Hindu caste system, which originated 3000 years ago. According to Population Census 2021 AD, Dalits constitute 13.6% of the total population. There are 21 castes in the Dalit community, including pahade (Bishwokarma, pariyar, mijar, Gandarba) and madhesi (Teli, chamar, mushar, paswan, dom). Dalit is the byproduct of Varna Babestha, initiated by the Jayesthiti Mall (1830). The king Manu categorised the people based on occupation by citing the Upanisad. Brahmins who are devoted to acquiring knowledge, and Kshatriyas who are the warriors and contribute to national security.

The Vashya who are engaged in trade. The Sudras are the people who serve others. The king Prithivin Narayan Shah accepted the caste system, which united the nations to build a greater single Nepal. Later the caste system was legitimized by the Muluki Ain in 2020 BS. Dalit people are considered untouchable and excluded from social institutions like temples and public places (Subedi, 2022). Because of the existing social system, the Dalit people are untouchable and unacceptable in the community as well as in school, since the majority of Dalit people are economically poor and unable to continue their education up to a higher level (Khanal, 2015).

Generally, Dalits are excluded and marginalised from society due to their occupation (Khanal, 2020). Regarding education, according to the report of CEHRD, Net enrolment of Dalits in primary education is 20% (out of 93.7%) and in higher education is 3.8%, significantly less than the national average (17.8%). About 15% of Dalit children have access to educational attainment, which is lower than the national average. The percentage of Dalits is higher among all children who are out of school. The present education system has been made in favour of the elite group and excludes the poor people. The traditional mindset of educational personnel keeps stereotypical thoughts toward Dalit children. Generally, they do not easily support the progress of Dalit people. The dropout rate is higher in Dalit children as compared to non-Dalit children. According to the report of CEHRD, the dropout rates of Dalit children are high at the elementary

level, particularly for girls (IIDS, 2009). Flash report 2022 showed that 54% of students enrolled at the basic level left school without completing the expected literacy skills required for the labour market. Dalit students had the highest dropout rate at the school level.

Particularly, understanding the Dalits and their social, cultural, and political positioning helped me to foster conceptual clarity. In terms of interpretation, the challenges they face in their perception of education are described from lived experience. I tried to generate meaning from the social and cultural context. In this study, what sorts of perception, concept, and worldview of Dalit and non-Dalit affect social relationships of education? The study aims to determine whether the problem lies in Dalit perception or the existing educational socio-political system. I belong to this community, and it has enlightened me about several situations I have encountered while pursuing my education. As a teacher, I used to work at a rural community school. Initially, Dalit students' enrollment seemed satisfactory, but later on, they gradually left the school without completing their education. In the classroom, when I used to teach, Dalit students were found to be silent and not responsive. They were often unsuccessful on the grade exam. This study explores Dalits' ways of interpreting education and the significant challenges they face in accessing schooling.

### **Research Question**

What challenges do the Dalit children face in pursuing education in school?

How do Dalit children experience the mainstream education practice of teaching?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Dalit people are culturally excluded due to ignorance of the existing social system. Upper caste people are keeping stigmatising thoughts and behaving in a discriminatory manner in public places and the social system.

#### **Discriminatory Practice at School**

Various forms of structural discrimination, isolation, and abuse toward Dalit children are widespread in schools, leading to dropouts. Financial limitations are a significant reason for the termination of education (Pyakurel, 2018). The discriminatory behaviour charged by teachers towards Dalit children due to a traditional mindset from family

acts as a catalyst for choosing to drop out of school (Bhatta *et al.*, 2008). The indirect discrimination by teachers, such as labelling a low performer, neglect, repeated blaming, leads to social exclusion in the school. Under this condition, the Dalit children are likely to be low performers, less attentive, and poorly engaged in classroom discourse (Bishwakarma, 2009). The Dalit children face a discriminatory attitude from friends and the community. The so-called upper caste people think that the education of Dalits is defunct and meaningless (Khanal, 2015). They believe that Dalit people grab opportunity by reservation regardless of meritocracy. In doing so, the quality of performance deteriorates. The upper-class people generally do not think about the efficacy of Dalit children. Dalit children have no potential for acquiring education. Dalits must always face challenges to power relations and social hierarchies (Benjamin, 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative interpretative phenomenology to explore the lived experience of phenomena in a social setting. The essence of this design is the tradition informed by a concern to understand the world based on the point of view of people who live in it (Bhatta *et al.*, 2008). The particular design of the meaning of the lived experiences of social settings and the shared meaning of similar experiences (Creswell, 2013). Under this study, the research approach helped to inquire into the lived experience of Dalit students regarding social and cultural perspectives in terms of education (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). The experience and narratives are drawn from the social setting of the classroom based on values and beliefs (Van Lankveld *et al.*, 2017). The students who participated in this study have struggled in classrooms dominated by the non-Dalit majority of the social system for the last ten years in their school experience. The participating students were Pahade Dalit and Madeshi Dalit from the marginalised community.

Regarding ethical issues, the participants were informed and consented to by meeting in school. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms. In-depth interviews via semi-structured interview guidelines were conducted to gather vital information. The participant were interviewed in their appropriate location and time. The participation was voluntary so that they could terminate the interview at any time. The interview was recorded by an audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. Triangulation and memo checking ensured data authenticity. Thematic analysis techniques

were chosen. Data analysis revealed the themes of collaboration and interactions with Dalit students. The transcriptions were thoroughly studied for a long time and seriously coded. The coded texts were categorised to develop a theme. Likewise, themes were further simplified to generate the central theme of the study. Themes were illustrated based on ground data and compared and contrasted with data and literature.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The participants were interviewed via semi-structured interview guidelines, and narratives were utilised to answer the research question by linking them to theories and literature related to the study objectives. The Dalits' challenges in pursuing education have been drawn from participants' experience.

### **Administrative Challenges**

The administrative barrier that impedes people's movement in the lines of educational attainment of Dalit students is undergoing administrative hurdles. The familiarity of Dalit is restricted due to the dogmatic mindset of the education leader in the school.

In this context, participant P1 said:

I have not had access to the reading facility as mentioned in the policy for Dalits. Since I came to this school, the principals of this school have not linked Dalit children with other teacher staff for effective participation. Sometimes the head teacher comes to the classroom and calls with a dominant word. The head teacher underestimated us and denied us the opportunity to participate in ECA.

Concerning the above context, the head teacher seems less responsible for children's education. Sometimes, when entering the classroom, Dalit students are called by dominant terms like Kami and dom. In the classroom, students feel uneasy and suffocated. The school staff also exhibits unnecessary and domineering behaviour. The social hierarchy theory advocates that social diversity is the mirror of educational development (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Every student can learn to their potential, but the teacher discriminates, separating the upper and lower castes. The teacher must construct an instructional module focusing on student diversity and motivation (Baraily & Sherpa, 2022). The head teacher of the school should implement the policy provision by transforming the traditional mindset into modern dynamism. In the school deregulation, the head teacher needs to

ensure the compulsory participation of Dalit students in the ECA organised by the school (Baraily, 2021b).

In the same context, another participant said:

The head teacher needs to monitor the class to see whether the teacher helps Dalit students engage in classroom activities effectively. Some of the Dalit students do not want to be involved in classroom discourse due to their poor economic status. The teaching strategies adopted by teachers avoid less attentive students.

In the above context, teachers are not sensitive to the engagement of Dalit students. They suffer from the anxiety of their family background, and they are unable to engage in classroom activities. The teacher might punish Dalit students without identifying their problem. Teachers should be facilitators for all the students and treat all the students equally (Regmi, 2017). The ideal teacher should help students according to their needs and interests. In the case of not paying attention in class, the teacher needs to identify the problem. The head teacher needs to monitor the class to see whether all students are engaged in the classroom activity.

Participant P2 said:

The home-school collaboration creates a supportive environment for the learners. Almost all teachers teach a traditional approach, focusing on children from the elite class. The school administration can create a link between the school and the family for the child's progress. The non-Dalit head teacher always focuses on non-Dalit children's activities.

In the above context, the teacher's teaching strategy is more traditional and favours elite-class children. Students' interests, needs, and motivations differ, and they learn differently. The assumption of Dalit students differs and expects exceptional guidance to develop their innate powers against the dogmatic thought of the social system (Baraily, 2024b). The parents should be informed of the child's progress. Mutual collaboration and partnership can cultivate their learning motivation (Dawadi & Bissaker, 2020). The nation should initiate the home-school collaboration activity that can assist the students' learning.

### **Negative Labeling**

The use of dominant words and names by people reduces the social identity in the community. Negative labelling motivates people to participate in the community. When rough words are used to address the

Dalit students, they gradually lose their motivation to learn. In this context, participant P3 said:

In the classroom, the teacher calls Dalit students by their surnames. In the classroom discourse, the teacher never provides the chance to participate. The teacher's focus is always confined to the talented student in the front seat. The Dalit student cannot get a seat at the front because of bullying.

In the above narration, the teacher treats the students with discriminatory lenses. The teacher focuses on non-Dalit students and highlights their progress accordingly. The teacher often serves intelligent students. The Dalit students, including low achievers, are marginalised from the classroom discourse. In doing so, the Herzberg motivation theory delineates that intrinsic motivation comes from satisfaction not obtained from the environment (Acquah *et al.*, 2021). The negative response of students in the classroom demoralizes students from participating in the teaching-learning activity. So, to ensure the full engagement of Dalit students in the class, the seating arrangement should be changed in favor of low achievers (Malik & Naeem, 2013). The teacher needs to inspect the child's activity frequently. Another participant P4 said:

When I try to engage in reading, the non-Dalit counterpart teases and underestimates. The teacher says Dalits get reservations and do not need to work hard. In such cases, I dislike reading in the classroom instead of being inspired. The teachers do not help us openly to give feedback.

The experience of participants shows that Dalit students are teased and harassed by non-Dalit peers and teachers. Their unusual interpretation leads to the domination of Dalit children (Baraily, 2021c). However, the reservation quota is insufficient; it is taken by indigenous peoples, women, and backward regions (Baraily & Rai, 2022). Only the Dalit students are blamed in the eyes of non-Dalit people. In another sense, the perception of Dalit students as not capable is the intention of continuing discrimination for the time coming ahead. Such practice obstructs the dynamism and mobility of society. Furthermore, the education institution cannot get momentum with such type of dogma. So, government need to conduct awareness program about inclusive education for teacher and students. Participant P5 said:

The Dalit students are marginalised in the classroom. We are influenced by teachers and students along the lines of knowledge acquisition. The teacher cannot trust Dalits, who can read and write like others. They think that Dalit students cannot invest in education due to their low social status.

In the above context, Dalit students are becoming the victims of ignorance of the social system. The classroom is diversified with caste, religion, language, ethnicity, etc. The needs and interests of each student are different. The teacher and non-Dalit students cover their eyes with traditional thoughts of a caste-based hierarchical system (Baraily & Sherpa, 2023). The trust toward the Dalit student is diluted due to the autocratic mindset. The social hierarchy theory emphasises that society can advance when each hierarchy component is equally valued and dignified. The teacher must consider how every student can progress with the appropriate support. The whole teaching-learning strategy is impaired in the absence of each student (Shahi, 2022). The teacher must create a well-accepted environment for all learners regardless of discrimination.

### **Unfriendly Behavior**

Inappropriate behaviour exhibited by the teacher and students toward the Dalit children in school refers to unfriendly behaviour. Without support from the school, no student can run ahead to achieve the expected goal. Participant p4 said:

I have been reading in this school for four years. I could not build intimate friends. When I introduced myself, my peers were reluctant to cooperate with me. In the case of confusion on any topic, they refuse to support me. Sometimes, I assume that I will not continue my academic career.

The Dalit students are excluded from interaction with non-Dalit peers. Generally, friendship is only maintained within the group. However, since the classroom is a single group, students are psychologically influenced by their family background. Due to the concept of the upper caste, Dalits rarely cooperate with Dalit children in educational discourse ( Devkota, 2018). In such conditions, the teacher cannot perform ideal teaching. Collaboration among students can enhance their learning habits for better achievement (Maudslay, 2014). The teachers must create an interactive environment by allowing all students to work together. The teacher also encourages students to build interpersonal communication to enhance academic strength.

Another participant P5 said, " Initially, the school staff respected me and helped with any school task. When they recognize me as a lower caste, slowly, they become far from supportive. If I request any support, show immediate emergency and go far away". In this concern, the school staff are also guided by the evils of the caste system. With the traditional



mindset, they treat Dalit students with ignorant eyes. School staff think that Dalit students are undervalued students, and there is no difference in treating them with stereotypical thought (Devkota, 2018). The institution's goal relates to the performance of all students, regardless of their caste. Diversity and difference are beautiful ornaments of school, so the teacher and students must be aware of the constitutional provisions of the people within the country. In favor of the above argument, Participant P7 said, "At the beginning of my school, the teacher and staff exhibited equal behaviour for all students. As the days go by, school staff introduce their background, community, family, and location, gradually changing perception through different attitudes".

This experience shows that teachers and staff still hold an autocratic and traditional mindset, which impedes social development. The students cannot get justice until they are psychologically supported by and within the school (Gurung, 2005). To overcome this situation, the teaching and non-teaching staff must be trained in a diversity management strategy for all learners. They should be informed that every child has an equal responsibility for achieving the institution's goal. So, the teaching and non-teaching staff should give equal value and respect to all students who come to school (Diemling, 2020). Another participant, P6, asserted as:

One of the office assistants told me that Dalit students never progress in their reading due to their fragile community. The family background is unsystematic and always falls into conflict. If something happens in the school, the presence of Dalits is sporadic. A Dalit member acts as a rubber stamp in the school management committee.

In the above assertion, the attitude toward Dalit children is negative and biased. Everybody in the school holds stereotypes about the progress of Dalit children. Due to the superstitious eye, the attitude is always unrealistic and obstructive to social development (Baraily, 2021a). So, with the infrequent events in the Dalit community, all of the children should not be treated with bias. The culprit of social conflict cannot be the reason for the child. So, educational institutions should think that all children are the same and ensure that children have the right to education as per constitutional provisions (Government of Nepal, 2015).

### **Domination by Staff**

The Dalit pupils are dominated by staff with the stigmatised thought of delivering different services. The service recipients are feeling shy about

the delayed activity of service providers. Another participant said, " *In this school, one of the people recognised as an administrator said to me, No need to read for Dalit, you get a reservation.* This type of connotation impedes the mobility of Dalit children. The nation has realised that Dalits have been exploited socially, culturally, educationally, and politically for centuries. In the nation's overall development, the Dalit community's contribution is remarkable. They are artist and engineers who can contribute to every aspect of development. The reservation is only partial support, but the compensation must be proportional and inclusive (Panta, 2015). It is necessary to open eyes for the emancipation of the Dalit community. In the same context as above, participant P8 said:

The school staff underestimate Dalit students, saying Dalits are dirty, Gandhi, and not sincere about sanitation. Dalits eat pig and buffalo meat, which are messy. Likewise, they drink alcohol and quarrel in the community. So, the Dalit students cannot read properly due to disturbances at home.

Scientifically, there is no meaning of eating habits for sanitation. Food cannot determine the personality of an individual. Intake of food depends on personal will. Whatever food they eat, their cognition and behaviour should be balanced with social values, norms, and reality (S. P. Devkota & Bagale, 2014). So, teachers and administrators must remove dogmatic thoughts from their mindsets to lead educational institutions smoothly and successfully.

### **Discriminatory Behaviour of a Teacher**

The Dalit students experience a variety of discriminatory behaviour from teachers within and outside the school. The teachers' feedback and guidance are lacking in encouraging Dalit children. Sometimes, the teacher exhibited negative labelling and stereotypes in classroom instruction. Participant P6 said:

Non-Dalit students occupy the seats in front of the classroom while Dalit students need a seat at the back. The teacher focuses on non-Dalit students only. If any Dalit student raises a hand to ask, the teacher gives either no response or a superficial one.

Regarding the above, the seating arrangement of students is unjust to Dalit students. Most front seats are occupied by non-Dalit students, and Dalit students need to sit in the back. Due to the mass of students, the Dalit students are excluded from effective involvement in the class (Baraily,

2024a). The teacher does not hear the children's voices and becomes non-responsive. To address this situation, the teacher needs to rotate the seating arrangement daily to accommodate Dalit students. Another participant P5 said:

Since I entered this school, no teachers have asked me about understanding the content. I once showed my homework for feedback, but said I had no time to check. The teacher focuses only on talented students, so I am less passionate about reading.

The above assertion shows that Dalit students are completely denied by the teacher, whether in the classroom or in the subject matter. Time allocation is adequate for teaching. The teacher must prepare a daily lesson plan that guides them to accomplish the teaching task (Subedi, 2022). The teacher needs to check homework for immediate feedback. Such formative assessment diagnoses the fundamental problem of the child and supports improving the quality of the learner (Bishwakarma, 2009). Regular checking and providing feedback can strengthen students' learning passions. Participant P3 claimed as follows:

Extracurricular activities are frequently organised in the school, but our participation is low. The teacher takes the names of non-Dalit students at any event without the opportunity to participate in developing a personality.

The above concern shows that Dalit students are excluded from participating in extracurricular activities organized by the school. Extracurricular activity is essential for every student's physical and mental well-being (Khanal, 2015). Effective participation in extracurricular activities keeps students mentally and psychologically sound. However, the program should be conducted by ensuring every student's involvement according to their need and interests. The program structure is designed so that at least one Dalit may participate.

### **Unfair Treatment and Poor Motivation for Education**

The impartial behaviour of teachers toward students creates poor motivation in the classroom. The effective student engagement seeks the teachers' friendly behaviors of the teacher in the school. The teacher's behaviour and the student's motivations are intermittently correlated. Participant P5 said:

I often feel a headache when thinking about reading mathematics. I have secured poor marks in this subject from the beginning of my studies. I

had no basic knowledge of mathematics because I could not get intensive support from the teachers in the lower grades.

According to the above assertion, Dalit students have poor motivation for mathematics due to a lack of basic knowledge. In the preliminary class, they had less support from the teacher and fell into the low performers category. To obtain better results, the student must learn basic mathematics concepts from the beginning (Pradhan, 2021). The teacher should focus on the low- and average-minded students to teach basic mathematical concepts. Another participant said:

The teachers discriminate for low-achieving students. He never tries to understand our problems in the classroom. Only the high-achieving students are in the eye of the teacher. If anybody asks questions about confusion, the teacher blames us for not knowing about simple matters.

Relating to the above, the teacher treats pupils with poor behavior. Only the intelligent students are in the eye of the teacher; average and low achievers, including Dalits, are excluded from the classroom activity. Dalit students are becoming victims of teaching-learning activities due to the stigmatizing thoughts of teachers. Principally, all the students in the class are the same and have equal rights to be educated. All types of children must be allowed to flourish in school (Koirala, 1998). The children should not be discriminated against to preserve their fundamental rights (Guinée, 2014). So, the teacher must create an accepted environment for all learners by adopting diagnostic teaching. By law, no child is left behind in pursuing an education from an academic institution.

### **De-motivated Action from the Administration**

As per the participants' narration, the Dalit children are demotivated by teachers and administrators. Dalit students get reservations, so no need to work hard in allocated subjects. The teaching materials and instruction are not trustworthy for Dalit students. One of the head teachers, H3, said:

This school is located in the Dalit community. The Dalit people are backwards and have a poor economic background. They are not aware of education and send their children to the Gulf countries to earn money. They don't write their caste at admission but claim Dalit scholarships.

In the above concern, Dalit people are underestimated. The Dalit people have no positive awareness about education, so they can not recognise the importance of education (Pyakurel, 2018). The traditional occupation

of Dalits is money producers; generally, they do not try to go elsewhere (Lamsal & Maharjan, 2015). For this purpose, a community awareness program should be launched in the community. Another head teacher, H1, said:

It is difficult to convince the Dalit community about the importance of education. A few students are enrolled in basic grades but cannot complete their education due to a poor economic background. The local municipality needs to conduct an awareness program to mitigate the dropout rate from school.

In the above context, the children of Dalit people do not have positive thoughts about education. Due to the scarce opportunities in education, the Dalit children are unable to access educational opportunities. The dropout rate of Dalits is higher than that of non-Dalits due to limited opportunities (Bishwakarma, 2009). The government offers a nominal reservation type, but it is still inadequate. The local Dalit people need to be empowered by education to grab the opportunity of inclusion (Infiorati, 2010). In the absence of empowerment, the reservation becomes meaningless and irrelevant for the justice of Dalit children. Dalit children must be educated to overcome the issue of meritocracy in public affairs (Budhathoki, 2013). Likewise, another head teacher, H2, said:

Most Dalit people are adopting their traditional occupations like blacksmithing, smithing, tailoring, and shoe making, which are considered moneymaking jobs. The Dalit children think that acquiring education is unproductive and jobless in our country. Education is suitable for upper caste children because they are linked and networked.

Relating to the above, the Dalit people think that the primary source of income is a traditional occupation. After pursuing education from school, they will be jobless and wander everywhere (Bishwakarma, 2015). Due to job placement scarcity, they think education is only for the elite, not for ordinary people.

## **CONCLUSION**

Dalit students are facing several challenges in pursuing quality education in Nepal. Specifically, caste-based discrimination and social exclusion, along with economic marginalisation, have a high impact on the learning experience of Dalit students. Due to the limited resource availability, inadequate curricular representation, and the bias of teachers, the low self-esteem and high dropout rate for the Dalit students. Likewise,

the lack of a supportive school environment and limited infrastructure in rural areas hamper Dalit students' growth and potential. Systemic reforms and inclusive policies need to be formulated to overcome these challenges. It requires the effective implementation of policies and programs to uplift disadvantaged and marginalised communities. The community awareness program and teachers' inclusive pedagogy training can support building a more equitable and inclusive environment for Dalit students.

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