



Persistent Educational Inequalities among Madhesi Dalit Children in Saptari District, Nepal

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Abstract

This study examines educational inequalities among Madhesi Dalit children in the Lokharam community of Chhinnamasta Rural Municipality, Saptari District, Nepal. Guided by the frameworks of social exclusion and intersectionality, the study explores how deeply rooted caste-based social practices in Nepalese society limit the educational opportunities of Madhesi Dalit children. Using qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with Dalit parents, teachers, education administrators, and representatives of Dalit-focused NGOs; focus group discussions with Dalit and non-Dalit students; and document review, the study reveals that the educational deprivation of the Madhesi Dalits is the accumulation of multiple culturally embedded factors, that have their roots in the ancient caste system, include poverty, child labour, early marriage, traditional gender norms, caste-based discrimination itself, and passivity of parents to their children's education. The Dalit scholarship programme, a financial incentive, intended to cover educational expenses of Dalits, is only partially supportive in the case of Madhesi Dalits, who suffer from substantial poverty. Its ineffectiveness is twofold: it is underfunded and not equity-based. Promoting educational opportunities for Madhesi Dalits requires an integrated, multidimensional approach, combining scholarship, material support to children and social-economic empowerment programmes to parents.

Introduction

Educational inequalities among traditionally marginalised caste groups have long been a major concern in Nepal. Dalits were historically regarded as a lower caste group within the social hierarchy and were excluded from basic resources and opportunities. Because of this historical exclusion, their educational attainment is low as they face many challenges. Among Dalit caste groups, Madhesi Dalits are even more disadvantaged in education due to persistent poverty and caste-based discrimination.

Education is regarded an important tool for promoting equality, empowerment, and social inclusion. Regarding education as a basic human right, the Government of Nepal has internationally committed to Educational initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In line with these commitments, Nepal has guaranteed inclusive and equitable education for all in the constitution, with special provisions for marginalised groups, including Dalits. The National Education Policy 2019 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019) and the School Education Sector Plan (SESP), 2022-2032 (MoEST, 2022) both place strong emphasis on inclusive and equitable education. In addition, the government has introduced the Dalit Scholarship Programme as a measure to reduce financial barriers of Dalit students. However, reports show that Dalit children, particularly Madhesi Dalit children, continue to experience high dropout rates and poor academic performance. This suggests that the policy efforts have not been fully effective in ensuring educational inclusion of Madhesi Dalits.

Numerous studies have been carried out on the educational deprivation of Dalits.

However, most of the studies have focused on Dalits as a single entity, while others have focused only on Hill Dalits. Although Madhesi Dalits face severe educational deprivation, few studies have focused on their educational situation. Therefore, this study examines the educational situation of Madhesi Dalits, especially the Dom and Musahar sub-castes, who are among the most educationally deprived groups in Nepal. This study explores how deeply rooted caste-based practices limit educational opportunities of Madhesi Dalit children. To examine their educational opportunities, the study applies the frameworks of social exclusion and intersectionality to show how caste stigma, poverty, and parental illiteracy interact to limit their educational opportunities (Bhattachan et al., 2009). The study further examines the extent to which the Dalit Scholarship Programme has contributed to increasing the educational participation of Madhesi Dalits.

Literature Review

The literature review is organized into six thematic headings: social stratification and caste-based exclusion; the social construction of Dalit identity in Nepal, education and the social mobility of Dalits; the Dalit Scholarship Programme and educational inclusion; theoretical perspectives: social exclusion and the intersectionality approach; and empirical evidence and research gaps.

Social Stratification and Caste-Based Exclusion

The caste system is a traditional form of social hierarchical system in which individuals are assigned a specific caste at birth. It is rooted in the traditional Hindu social order and was officially established in Nepal through the *Muluki Ain* (Civil Code) of 1854. The system classified people as higher caste members to the "untouchables," based on their caste status. This classification has influenced their

access to resources and opportunities and those who were placed at the higher caste positions enjoyed better access to resources and opportunities, while those were labeled as lower castes or untouchables faced significant obstacles (Dumont, 1980).

Dalits in Nepal remain at the bottom of the caste hierarchy as "untouchables" and have experienced intense caste-based discrimination in educational opportunities, public places, and religious institutions, which restricted their ability to improve social and economic mobility (Cameron, 1998; Bennett, 2005). Although untouchability was legally abolished in Nepal in 1962, its effects still perpetuate in society, particularly among Madhesi Dalit communities. As a result, limited material and financial resources restrict their access to education.

Social Construction of Dalit Identity in Nepal

The word "Dalit" in Sanskrit means "broken" or "downtrodden" (Sunder, 2015) and has become a politically coined word, which refers to communities who are the poor and oppressed (Joseph, 2004). In Nepal, Dalits were historically placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy and were subjected to various forms of social restrictions to limit their upward mobility, and were physically and socially isolated from the rest of society (Mandal, 2010). The historical caste-based discriminatory practices towards Dalits have not only created a denial of their human rights, in terms of economic livelihood, access to facilities, educational opportunities, and attainment (Sob, 2012), but also have been reflected in their social relations and public behaviour. Thus, their caste identity as a public identity has produced feelings of inferiority, distrust, and low self-confidence (Hoff & Pandey, 2006), which has greatly

affected their achievements, status, and social identity (ibid.).

Dalits are a heterogeneous caste group in terms of language, religion, and culture (Dahal, Gurung, Acharya, Hemchuri, & Swarnakar, 2002). They constitute about 13.4 percent of Nepal's total population (CBS, 2021), who are broadly categorized into Hill Dalits (Kami, Damai, Sarki) and Madhesi Dalits (Chamar, Musahar, Dom, Tatma, among others) based on their origin. While both groups face discrimination, Madhesi Dalits experience severe socio-economic and educational deprivation, due to poverty, particularly caused by landlessness (Bishwakarma, 2017). Structural inequalities among some minority Madhesi Dalit sub-castes, particularly Doms and Musahars, are severe since landlessness is common among them, and they are much more excluded than others (ibid.).

Education and Social Mobility of Dalits

Education is a tool for socio-economic development of individuals, particularly for the marginalised groups. Human capital theory emphasizes that the investment in education makes economic returns by enhancing individual's knowledge, skills, and productivity (Becker, 1964). Similarly, critical pedagogy emphasizes the transformative potential of education to challenge structural oppression, enabling people to understand social inequalities, and contribute for social change. Therefore, educational pedagogy should support individuals to understand the structural causes of oppression (Freire, 1970). In this regard, studies highlight that in spite of significant increase in the school enrolment of Dalits, they continue to face barriers in schools and society that constrain their retention and learning outcomes (Chalaune, 2020). In schools, Dalit students are often segregated in seating arrangements and excluded from

group activities by higher caste peers, while in society, they continue to experience subtle forms of discriminatory practices from higher caste relatives. As a result, they gradually lose interest in their school, and attend irregularly, and achieve limited learning outcomes as they think that school is not supportive of them.

Dalit Scholarship Programme and Educational Inclusion

The Dalit Scholarship Programme has been implemented as a financial incentive for Dalit students. It provides Rs. 400 per year to Dalit students studying in Grades 1-5 in community schools, regardless of their economic background to help them continue their education (CEHRD, 2024). The provision of Dalit scholarship has helped improve school enrolment of Madhesi Dalits to some extent; however, it has not significantly improved their retention and learning outcomes.

The literacy rate among Madhesi Dalits is about 51.9 percent, which is lower than the overall Dalit literacy rate of 67.2 percent, the Hill Dalit literacy rate of 75.7 percent, and the national average of 76.2 percent (CBS, 2021). This indicates that a significant proportion of Madhesi Dalit children are out of school and remain illiterate. Government reports and research studies frequently indicate that among Madhesi Dalit communities, some vulnerable communities, such as the Doms and Musahars, are more disadvantaged in education. The school dropout rates among them remain high. Many children from these communities leave school during the academic year or are unable to continue their education the following year due to financial constraints (UNICEF, 2016). Girls from these communities are even more disadvantaged, as they are more affected by poverty, patriarchal norms, domestic responsibilities, and early marriage (ibid.).

Theoretical Perspectives: Social Exclusion and the Intersectionality Approach

Social exclusion, as Witcher (2013) states, is the state of social disadvantage in which individuals or certain communities are systemically excluded from access to rights, opportunities, and resources and deprived of their basic human rights; thus social exclusion is a lack of social justice. It is the denial of the rights of social integration and identity (ibid.). Social exclusion is multidimensional in nature, including both economic and social deprivation, and hence exclusion in one dimension may create an exclusion in the other dimension too (Silver, 2007). Long-lasting discriminatory caste system has marginalised Madhesi Dalits socially, culturally and economically, limiting their access to education (Thorat & Newman, 2007). Among the Madhesi Dalits, Dom and Musahar communities, who are in the minority among Dalits, are even more excluded. This study adopted intersectionality approach to examine how caste, poverty, gender, and region intersect to produce educational disadvantage among Madhesi Dalits (Crenshaw, 1991).

A human-rights perspective views education as a basic right that every child should be able to enjoy without discrimination. So, the state has the responsibility to ensure that education is available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable for all children (UNESCO, 2000; Tomasevski, 2004). However, schools often reflect culture of dominant castes. As a result, students from marginalised communities may feel unfamiliar and excluded in the school environment which affect their participation and academic performance.

Empirical Evidence and Research Gaps

The existing research shows that structural and cultural barriers persist among Dalits, limiting their upward mobility. Most of the

studies have considered Dalits as a single entity, and others have primarily focused on Hill Dalits alone. Madhesi Dalits, who experience severe socio-economic and educational disadvantages, as cumulative effects of traditional caste-based exclusionary practices, have received little attention. For this reason, this study focuses on Madhesi Dalits, with a particular emphasis on Dom and Musahar sub-castes, who have the lowest literacy rates among Madhesi Dalits (Bishwakarma, 2017). This study primarily examines how structural inequality, socio-economic status, and poverty intertwine to determine their limited educational opportunities from the perspective of key stakeholders, and suggest ways to remove structural and cultural barriers to improve their educational opportunities.

In addition, since most of the previous studies have explored the effectiveness of the Dalit Scholarship Programme through a quantitative approach, often neglecting its qualitative aspect, this study assesses the programme through the lived experiences of beneficiaries. It aims to capture the educational challenges faced by Madhesi Dalits and offer a deep understanding for policymakers, education administrators, and other education stakeholders in addressing the issues of educational inclusion.

Methodology

The methodology is structured into seven headings, namely, research design, study area and population, sampling strategy, data collection methods, tools, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was used to examine how entrenched structural barriers cumulatively shape educational

opportunities of Madhesi Dalits, and to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the Dalit scholarship programme. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to examine participants' lived experiences and perceptions of caste-based discrimination and its effects on schooling. This study adopted the theoretical frameworks of social exclusion and intersectionality to analyze both pre-identified factors, such as poverty, caste-based discrimination, socio-economic marginalization, and educational disadvantage, and emergent factors, such as traditional gendered norms, subtle forms of caste-based discrimination, and peer influences, in order to examine how structural inequalities intersect with intra-Dalit diversity to shape educational experience of Madhesi Dalits.

Study Area and Population

To study educational deprivation among Madhesi Dalits, Saptari District in Madhesh Province was purposively selected as the study area because it is one of the districts with a large Madhesi Dalit population and a high prevalence of extreme poverty among their sub-castes. Madhesi Dalits make up around 16 percent of the Madhesh province's total population and have the lowest literacy rates in the country (CBS, 2021). Among Madhesi Dalits, particular emphasis was given to the Dom and Musahar sub-castes due to their lower literacy rates even among the Madhesi Dalit community. The study was conducted in the Lokharam community of Chhinnamasta Rural Municipality in Saptari because Lokharam is a village with a large number of Madhesi Dalit households.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling method was used to select participants for the study. The participants

were selected purposively from diverse backgrounds representing different age groups, genders, educational backgrounds, and economic conditions. Participants with relevant knowledge of Madhesi Dalit education and the Dalit Scholarship Programme were selected. To facilitate access and build trust, participants were approached through education administrators, local Dalit leaders, teachers, and colleagues.

The sample included focus group discussions (FGDs) with two groups of students including Dalits and non-Dalits. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Dalit parents, teachers and head teachers, NGO representatives working on Dalit welfare, and education administrators from the Education Development and Coordination Office (EDCU). Table 1 below describes the participants:

Table 1. *Details of the participants for semi-structured interview and FGD*

Participants	No.	Gender
Dalit parents	10	4 males and 6 females
Teachers and head teachers	5 teachers (2 Dalits and 3 non-Dalits), 4 head teachers	male
EDCU officials	3	male
NGO representatives	7 (3 from Saptari and 4 from central level, Kathmandu)	male
Students	2 FGD groups (non-Dalit and Dalit students)	non-Dalit group: 5 boys and 5 girls Dalit group: 5 boys and 5 girls

Source: Field data, 2018

Data Collection Methods

To collect data, three main data collection methods were used, namely, semi-structured interviews, FGDs and document analysis. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in Maithili and Nepali, and later translated into English while analyzing data to draw findings.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Dalit parents, teachers and head teachers, NGO representatives working for Dalit welfare, and education administrators from EDCU to explore experiences and perceptions of schooling, effectiveness of scholarship, barriers of education for the marginalised Madhesi Dalits, and perceptions of social exclusion. Interviews were

conducted for 45 and 60 minutes which were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed manually for analysis.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with two separate groups of students which consisted of Dalits and non-Dalits to facilitate their collective reflection, shared experiences and perceptions of the students on social, cultural and economic factors influencing on their educational opportunities. Each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes, providing participants the opportunity to discuss their perceptions and experiences on educational participation. The information drawn from FGDs provided additional insights to validate the data from semi-structured interviews.

Document Analysis

Policy documents, government reports, scholarship guidelines, etc. were analyzed to examine the implementation of education policies and programmes, and identify inconsistencies between policy documents and its actual implementation. The data from document analysis helped strengthen the credibility of findings from semi-structured interviews and FGDs. It was ensured by triangulating participants' experiences and perceptions with policy frameworks and institutional reports.

Tools

The study employed semi-structured interviews and FGDs with five different categories of respondents. Four sets of semi-structured interview questions were used for Dalit parents, teachers and head teachers, EDCU officials of Saptari and Dalit-focused NGO representatives from Saptari and the capital, Kathmandu to explore perceived key barriers to educational opportunities of Madhesi Dalits and the effectiveness of the Dalit scholarship programme, and the strategies to address the barriers. Further, a set of FGD question was developed for Dalit and non-Dalit students to facilitate discussions on their educational experiences. All interview questions were first prepared in English and then translated into Nepali for the ease of the respondents, and expert review was made to ensure their validity. The interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent of the interviewees. Field notes were also taken to maintain contextual information to support interview data.

Data Analysis

All audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and FGDs were transcribed manually, and major themes and concepts were identified from the transcripts through an analysis of the

root causes of educational deprivation among Madhesi Dalits. Pre-determined themes derived from the conceptual framework, such as caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and educational access, as well as emergent themes generated from the field data, such as parental illiteracy and perceptions of children's education, and gender roles and responsibilities, were analyzed to examine how they interact to create educational disadvantage of Madhesi Dalits.

The thematic content analysis was done manually in order to derive the findings. It is well-suited to help understand the multifaceted in-depth analysis of people's judgments, observations, experiences and perceptions about the world, and thereby to discover the underlying meaning in the subject (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The findings which were drawn from different data sources were verified through triangulation to ensure accuracy, validity and credibility of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the author's university prior to the fieldwork. In the field before conducting the interview, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were told that the data would be used solely for the research purpose, and only pseudonyms would be used in the paper to protect their confidentiality. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and for children, the consent was obtained from both the parents and the children.

Results

The findings are drawn from fieldwork conducted in the Lokharam community of Chhinnamasta Rural Municipality, Saptari, Nepal. Using semi-structured interviews,

FGDs, and document review, the findings reveal that educational deprivation among Madhesi Dalits in the Lokharam village results from the interaction of socio-cultural and economic factors embedded in traditional caste-based discrimination. While the findings primarily reflect the experiences of Madhesi Dalits in this community, they can also be judged to represent overall Madhesi Dalits in general. The data were originally collected in 2018, and have been updated and reanalyzed with recent government reports and relevant literature (MoEST, 2022; CEHRD, 2024; CBS, 2021).

The findings reveal that a multi-layered pattern of exclusion, including structural, cultural, and economic barriers interacts to produce educational disadvantage among Madhesi Dalits. Caste-based discriminatory practices limit access to economic resources, opportunities, and self-esteem, which create a cycle of poverty. Poverty, in turn, limits access to educational resources. In addition, traditional gender norms limit girls' schooling. Peer group influences during adolescence, parental illiteracy and passivity toward their children's education further contribute to their educational disadvantage. The limited effectiveness of the Dalit Scholarship Programme also constrains retention and learning outcomes of Madhesi Dalit children.

Madhesi Dalits in the Lokharam community suffer from severe poverty which has now become the major cause of their educational deprivation. Most Madhesi Dalit households in the Lokharam community are landless and reside on public or informal land (*ailani*), depending on irregular, and low paid daily wage labour. The parents explained that they do not own any agricultural or household property and they do not own any land for cultivation. Being landless, they have limited

opportunities to earn family incomes. They work in others' fields for everyday survival. The earnings from their physical labour are not sufficient to meet their basic livelihood needs.

Poverty has contributed to child labour, which is another major cause of school dropout and poor academic performance among Madhesi Dalit children. As they grow older, they gradually become aware of their families' poor economic conditions and become involved in income-generating activities to support their family livelihoods. Boys are engaged in agricultural work, construction, or other informal labour. They go to work in nearby towns or go abroad as migrant workers. As one parent reported, his elder son left school after taking the Grade 10 examination and went abroad as a migrant worker. Parents tend to rely on their children to support the family livelihood, either by asking them to do household chores at home while they go to work or by joining them in physical labour for earning. Due to poverty, Madhesi Dalit girls suffer more, and their school absenteeism is high because they have to support their mothers at home by doing household chores and looking after their siblings. This is also influenced by the fact that families are generally large and have many children. Parents reported that it is difficult to choose between their children's education and basic subsistence needs. These situations lead to Madhesi Dalit children dropping out of school during the academic year and discontinuing their studies in subsequent years.

Peer group influence among Madhesi Dalit children in their adolescence is also a determining factor contributing to school dropout. Many Madhesi Dalit students, influenced by Dalit peers in their neighborhood and Dalit schoolmates, leave

school in their adolescence. They drop out of school before completing their basic level education (Grade 8). This situation is more common in Dom and Musahar communities, because the economic conditions are more vulnerable within these groups. One parent stated that his son left school after Grade 8 because his friend from next door also left school. As he was abroad at that time, he could not guide his son properly."

Household poverty further contributes to early marriage. This practice is more prevalent in some marginalised Madhesi Dalit communities, such as the Musahars, because many parents are illiterate and they do not value education. Both sons and daughters tend to get married early but the girls get married even earlier. As one teacher noted, "By the time they reach class eight, half of the girls are already engaged or married." After marriage, they cannot continue their education for different reasons. Many of the interviewed teachers, head teachers, and NGO representatives hold the common view that early marriage is prevalent among some Madhesi Dalit communities that are more vulnerable in terms of economic condition, social awareness, and educational opportunities, and the incidence of early marriage is even higher among girls from those communities. The NGO representatives argue that parents want to escape from their responsibility for their daughters by marrying them off and sending them off to their in-laws' houses. The parents frequently withdraw daughters from school during adolescence to prepare them for marriage or domestic roles. They seem to escape from the economic burden of educating their daughters for many years. Thus, from the above findings and associated literature, it can be deduced that poverty, parental illiteracy and lack of awareness are the determining factors leading to early marriage among Madhesi Dalits,

particularly among girls, which is one of the main reasons for their discontinuation of education.

The Dalit Scholarship programme has helped Madhesi Dalits to improve school enrolment to some extent. However, it has not contributed in their retention and learning outcomes. Almost all participants, including parents, NGO representatives, and education administrators expressed similar opinions that the scholarship has supported to increase in school enrolment for the Madhesi Dalits, however, it has not significantly contributed to retaining the students in school. NGO representatives remarked that the amount is distributed on an equal basis regardless of their socio-economic status, and therefore, does not adequately support the Madhesi Dalit children in the Lokharam community, who suffer from severe poverty.

The society and school environment have not yet become Dalit-friendly. Discriminatory practices continue to shape the everyday experiences of Madhesi Dalits in the Lokharam community. The NGO representatives reported that society is still not accepting Dalits openly, though many changes have been realized at the superficial level through education. Parents insist that their children still face discrimination in school from their non-Dalit peers, perhaps in more covert forms. As one parent explained, "Our children go to school, but they do not feel they belong there." This situation creates feelings of humiliation and hesitation, and gradually they lose their interest in school and eventually stop going to school. However, government officials, including EDCU officials, teachers and head teachers argue that discriminatory practices no longer exist in schools.

Discussion

The findings reveal that educational deprivation among Madhesi Dalits in the Lokharam community of Chhinnamasta Rural Municipality, Saptari is the cumulative effect of traditional caste-based practices. These practices restricted them from access to resources and opportunities and became economically poor. Due to poverty, they have had limited access to education. There are multiple interconnected factors which cumulatively produce disadvantages in their lives. These factors include household poverty, landlessness, illiteracy, patriarchal gender roles, and early marriage practices. The findings highlight that poverty is a major cause of educational disadvantage among the Madhesi Dalits and it has further been intensified with other intersecting factors, including parental illiteracy, low motivation toward children's education and patriarchal norms to worsen its impact. Among Madhesi Dalit caste groups, some minority communities such as Doms and Musahars are disadvantaged in socio-economic and educational opportunities.

The multidimensional frameworks of social exclusion (Sen, 1999; 2000) explain how social stigma, material and psychological deprivation interact to reproduce both active and passive forms of exclusion among Madhesi Dalits. The previous exclusion from resources and opportunities among Madhesi Dalits has resulted deprivation in both material and psychological forms. Materially, they have limited access to education, employment, and land ownership. This material deprivation produces a cycle of intergenerational poverty, as described by Dumont (1980). Psychologically, they experience caste-based stigma and lack of recognition and low self-esteem. Together,

these processes lead to both economic hardship and psychological disadvantage.

Landlessness is a common among Madhesi Dalits in the Lokharam community. Most Madhesi Dalit families, particularly Doms and Musahars, are *bhumihin sukumbasi* (landless squatters) and are living in *ailani jagga* (public places). They have no legal right to it, although they have been living in these places for the last three or four generations. Being landless, they have limited opportunities for earning family income. They go to work in others' fields for everyday survival. Since they are paid a very low wage, the earnings they make from their physical labour are not sufficient to make a living. Because families struggle to meet their daily needs, parents are forced to focus on survival over schooling. That's why, boys are often sent to work as labourers, while girls are engaged in household responsibilities. It leads to irregular in school attendance and higher dropout rates among Madhesi Dalit children.

Landlessness has created household poverty, which has driven child labour in the Lokharam Dalit community. Madhesi Dalit parents have to work in other people's houses or fields in a low wage which is not sufficient to make a living. That's why, parents are compelled to involve their children in labour. They usually engage their daughters in domestic responsibilities when they go out to earn a living, while they send their sons to work as labourers within or outside the country. These situations lead to irregular school attendance and eventual discontinuation of school. Madhesi Dalit girls are more affected by these conditions. As a result, they tend to arrive late to school, be irregular in their attendance, and often perform poorly.

Madhesi Dalit girls are multiply disadvantaged as they are more affected by poverty, patriarchal norms, domestic responsibilities, and early marriage practices. As Bajracharya and Amin (2012) state, household poverty is directly associated with early marriage in Nepal, and many girls from poor families, including the Madhesi Dalit girls marry at adolescent age. Since poverty, parental illiteracy and lack of awareness are the key factors contributing to early marriage among Madhesi Dalits, particularly for girls, early marriage is one of the main reasons for their discontinuation of education. While parents constantly have to worry about their daily needs, they engage daughters to do household chores or care for younger siblings. These responsibilities further disadvantage Madhesi Dalit girls in their education. As a result, they often arrive late to school, are irregular in school attendance, and perform poorly in schools.

Parental illiteracy and passivity toward their children's education further constrain their children's educational opportunities and learning outcomes. Most of the Madhesi Dalit parents in the Lokharam community are illiterate or minimally educated, which limits their capacity to assist their children with homework. In addition, they seem to have low motivation toward educating their children because they think that there is little or no benefit to be gained from educating their children for many years, as one parent remarked, "Our children cannot get good jobs even with education, and neither can they fight for scholarships." This indicates that the perceptions of low returns from education further limit parental aspirations for their children's education.

The Dalit Scholarship Programme, which is expected to mitigate financial barriers of Dalit

children and enhance access to education, retention, and learning outcomes, has been reported to have some shortcomings. Its equal distribution among all Dalits regardless of economic status, has disadvantaged the poor Madhesi Dalits in the Lokharam community. Almost all participants, including parents, NGO representatives, and education administrators expressed that the scholarship has supported to increase in school enrolment for the Madhesi Dalits, however, it has not significantly contributed to retaining the students in school. NGO representatives remarked that the amount is distributed on an equal basis regardless of their socio-economic status, and therefore, does not adequately support the Madhesi Dalit children in the Lokharam community, who suffer for severe poverty.

The study has some limitations. It included Madhesi Dalits in Chhinnamasta Rural Municipality only and primarily focused on the Dom and Musahar sub-castes. Although the study ensured participants from wider range of groups within the specific region, it did not include Madhesi Dalit participants from other regions. Therefore, while the study provides the depth and contextual richness of the findings by focusing on a single municipality, its findings may not be statistically generalizable. In addition, the effectiveness of the Dalit Scholarship Programme was based mainly on beneficiaries' self-reported experiences, perceptions, and feelings, rather than quantitative data, which may have introduced bias. In addition, although data from different sources were triangulated to enhance credibility of findings, they may not be fully generalizable to all Madhesi Dalit communities or the broader Dalit population.

Conclusion

This study shows how traditional caste-based practices have produced educational deprivation among Madhesi Dalits in the Lokharam community. The findings also suggest that the Dalit Scholarship Programme has had mixed results. It has helped increase enrolment but it has not made significant difference in attendance and learning outcomes. To improve the effectiveness of the programme, it should be supported by other measures such as income-generating activities and awareness programmes to the parents. Schools should also become more inclusive by creating fair environment, and ensuring the representation of Madhesi Dalits as teachers, particularly female teachers, and school management committee members.

The study suggests that comprehensive, multidimensional interventions should be implemented simultaneously at the household, school, and community levels to promote the socio-economic and educational inclusion of Madhesi Dalits. Economic empowerment plays an important role in breaking the cycle of exclusion. Substantial poverty-reduction strategies should be targeted to the Madhesi Dalit communities on a larger scale. In addition to the small-scale financial support, such as the Dalit scholarship, to address immediate financial barriers, larger scale interventions such as secure land ownership, vocational training and skills development activities, and other income-generating programmes are needed for Madhesi Dalit households to reduce poverty and thereby ensure meaningful education inclusion for Madhesi Dalit children. Overall, the findings have important implications for policymakers and education administrators in designing and implementing effective policies to promote the educational inclusion of Madhesi Dalits.

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