

Position of Dalits in Local Governance: A Discussion

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Abstract

This study examined the status of Dalits in local governance in Nepal, highlighting the persistent challenges they face despite constitutional and legal reforms. Dalits, historically marginalized in Nepal's caste system, continue to experience exclusion from meaningful participation in political and administrative processes. Although legal frameworks such as the Local Level Election Act of 2017 mandate Dalit representation, particularly in ward committees, these provisions often result in symbolic participation rather than substantive influence. The study emphasizes that while Dalit women have been elected to local governance positions, they frequently face exclusion from key decision-making bodies and are marginalized within their roles. At higher levels of governance, Dalit representation remains minimal, with few Dalit individuals occupying executive positions like mayors or deputy mayors. Caste-based discrimination within political parties further hampers the nomination of qualified Dalit candidates. Despite these legal measures, the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy continues to limit Dalits' power, leaving them dependent on upper-caste individuals and reinforcing unequal power dynamics. This research calls for comprehensive reforms that not only address legal and political representation but also challenge the socio-cultural structures that perpetuate caste-based discrimination. By focusing on both the institutional barriers and societal attitudes that marginalize Dalits, the study advocates for a more inclusive and participatory local governance system. It underscores the need for a transformative approach that goes beyond tokenism to ensure that Dalits can genuinely participate and influence the decision-making processes at all levels of governance.

Keywords: Dalits, Local Governance, Caste Discrimination, Social Exclusion, Participatory Democracy

Introduction

The caste system is deeply rooted in several South Asian societies, including India, Nepal and Pakistan. It represents a form of social stratification that organizes individuals into rigid social hierarchies based on birth and associated traditional roles (Gupta, 2002). This system is characterized by hereditary membership, endogamy and fixed social roles, resulting in clearly defined social divisions. Berreman (1967) refers to caste as a system of ascribed stratification supported by pluralistic socio-cultural norms and hierarchical interactions, emphasizing that the rigid social layers are maintained by strict rules and boundaries. Ghurye (1964) expands on this idea, noting that the caste system encompasses limitations on food sharing, social relationships, marriage and occupation, all of which contribute to the preservation of a deeply embedded hierarchy. These limitations enable upper caste groups to dominate, while individuals born into lower castes, particularly Dalits, face systemic oppression and exclusion.

The marginalization of Dalits, historically labeled as ‘untouchables’, is a product of both socio-cultural discrimination and structural barriers. Despite modern legal reforms, Dalits in Nepal continue to endure political, economic and social marginalization. This enduring discrimination reflects the traditional Varna model in Hindu society, which classifies people into four hierarchical castes: Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders) and Sudras (servants and untouchables) (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2008). The Hindu scripture Manusmriti justifies this division by linking it to one's work or profession, reinforcing the belief in a divine origin of caste distinctions. Deshpande (2010) elaborates on the mythological basis of the caste system, citing the Rig-Veda which claims that different castes originated from different parts of the primal man's body placing Brahmans at the top and Sudras at the bottom. Such ideological foundations have contributed not only to a vertical social hierarchy but also to psychological divisions based on perceived purity and impurity.

Nepal's caste-based stratification, heavily influenced by Hindu ideology, is seen as one of the most rigid and ancient forms of social hierarchy. Pyakurel (2007) emphasizes that caste is often seen as immutable; individuals are born into a caste and rarely have the opportunity to transcend it. The formal institutionalization of caste in Nepal dates back to the 13th century during King Jayasthiti Malla's reign and was later codified by Prime Minister Janga Bahadur Rana in the 1854 Civil Code. This code established a four-tier caste hierarchy, with Dalits occupying the lowest level (Hoffer, 2004). Although modern Nepal claims to uphold principles of equality, the historical codification of caste continues to shape societal attitudes and behaviors. Dalits frequently encounter practices of untouchability, such as the use of holy water by upper castes to ‘purify’ spaces after contact (Bhattachan et al., 2009). Such deep-seated beliefs continue to deprive Dalits of dignity, social participation and access to justice.

The concepts of social exclusion and inclusion have become critical in analyzing caste-based disparities. While the idea of social exclusion originated in Europe, it has been adapted in the South Asian context to describe systematic discrimination against specific social groups, including Dalits (Ziyouddin, 2009). Social exclusion manifests in multiple forms, ranging from barriers in education and employment to limited access to public institutions. Commins (2004) describes it as a dynamic process that deprives individuals or groups from full participation in the economic and social life of society (p. 68). Rodgers et al. (1995) further argue that caste-based exclusion reinforces multiple disadvantages that overlap and perpetuate inequality. Over time, the caste ideology has legitimized unequal access to privileges and created entrenched systems of injustice. Thapar (1979) notes that upper castes, particularly Brahmans, developed social rules that maintained their dominance and these systems were further reinforced by colonial administrations.

Caste-based exclusion also undermines democratic processes such as local governance and deliberation. Deliberative decision-making, which emphasizes collective reasoning, evidence-based discussions and inclusivity, often fails in caste-based societies due to pre-existing power imbalances. Ideally, this process enhances accountability and fosters decisions that serve the common good. However, in contexts like Nepal, deliberative mechanisms are manipulated by social elites, leaving marginalized groups like Dalits with symbolic or

superficial participation. The unequal power dynamics prevent meaningful representation and reduce deliberation to a procedural formality, rather than a genuine democratic process. As a result, the sustainability and legitimacy of decisions in such settings are severely compromised. To address these issues, it is essential to not only reform governance structures but also dismantle the deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers that perpetuate caste-based discrimination (Bhattarai & Pokhrel, 2022).

This study has been conducted to examine the position of Dalits in local governance in Nepal, focusing on their historical marginalization and current participation barriers. The research employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing document analysis as the primary data collection method. Secondary data sources, including academic literature, legal texts such as the Constitution of Nepal and the Local Level Election Act 2017 and reports from institutions like the National Dalit Commission, were systematically reviewed. Thematic content analysis was used to identify key patterns related to caste-based exclusion, representation gaps and challenges in Dalit participation in both local and federal governance. Through this approach, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural, institutional and historical factors shaping Dalit involvement in Nepal's governance processes.

Objective

The overall objective of the study is to explore the position of Dalits in local governance. The specific objective of the study includes :
To explore the context of how Dalits participate in the decision-making of local governance.

Literature Review

Dalits in Nepal historically referred to as "untouchables," represent one of the most marginalized communities in the country. The term "Dalit," meaning "oppressed" or "broken" gained prominence in Nepal after 1990, aligning with the nation's democratic transition. According to the 2011 national census, Dalits constitute approximately 13.6 percent of Nepal's population, though some estimates suggest the figure could be as high as 20 percent. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, Dalits continue to face systemic discrimination and social exclusion (JoGHR, 2020).

The caste system in Nepal, deeply rooted in Hindu traditions, categorizes individuals into hierarchical groups, with Dalits positioned at the bottom. This stratification has historically denied Dalits access to education, land ownership and participation in political processes. Practices such as untouchability, though legally abolished, persist in various forms, affecting Dalits' daily lives and interactions. Furthermore, Dalits often face barriers in accessing public services, including healthcare and justice systems, exacerbating their marginalization (Bhattachan et al., 2009).

Efforts to uplift the Dalit community have been initiated through various legal and institutional frameworks. The establishment of the National Dalit Commission aimed to address issues of discrimination and promote Dalit rights. Additionally, the Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense and Punishment) Act of 2011 criminalized caste-based discrimination. Despite these measures, implementation remains a challenge and many

Dalits continue to experience social and economic disparities (Nepal National Dalit Commission, 2011).

In recent years, there has been a growing movement advocating for Dalit rights and social justice. Civil society organizations and activists have been instrumental in bringing attention to the issues faced by Dalits, pushing for policy reforms and greater inclusion. However, achieving substantive change requires not only legal interventions but also a transformation of societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate caste-based discrimination (Joshi, 2022).

Citizen participation is defined in a variety of ways. World Bank (1996) defined participation as a process via which stakeholders sway and share power over development activities, decisions and resources that affect them. Glass (1979) described citizen participation as an opportunity for citizens to take part in the government decision making or planning processes. For Slocum et al. (1995), citizen participation is a way of communicating the interests of individuals and society about development plans, as these planning efforts affect the general public and other groups. Creighton (2005) argues that citizen participation is a process that incorporates public concerns, needs and values into governmental and corporate decision making. Yvonne (2010) is of the opinion that the citizens should be actively and directly involved in decisions affecting their lives. Citizen participation bridges the gaps among the government, civil society, private sector and general citizens; creates shared thought of local situation, priorities and programs. Following the views expressed by the scholars, citizen participation can be conceptualized as a decision-making path and space where citizens are involved and engaged in planning and development process at all levels.

Citizen participation reflects democratic ideas, particularly at the grassroots level (Lafont, 2015; West, 2015). In particular, participatory planning has been revitalized as one of the key vehicles to engage citizen in local decision-making (Bhusal, 2015). Real development begins with the active and meaningful participation of citizens. In fact, citizen participation is at the heart of democracy and democracy is not possible unless citizen can freely participate in the governance process (Astrom, 2019). Pimbert and Wakeford (2001) argued that democracy would become empty and meaningless without the consideration, participation and engagement of citizens. Active and meaningful participation is, therefore, a sign of democratic and participatory governance.

Dalits, constituting approximately 13.8 percent of Nepal's population, have historically faced systemic exclusion from political and administrative spheres. Despite constitutional provisions aimed at ensuring proportional representation, their presence in local governance remains limited and often symbolic. At the local level, the Local Level Election Act of 2017 mandates the inclusion of at least one Dalit woman in each ward committee. This provision led to the election of 6,567 Dalit women in 2017 and 6,620 in 2022. However, challenges persist, including unfilled seats due to a lack of candidates and the marginalization of elected Dalit women in decision-making processes. Many report being excluded from key committees and facing discrimination from colleagues, highlighting the gap between representation and meaningful participation (BK, 2023).

Beyond ward-level positions, Dalit representation in executive roles is minimal. In the 2022 local elections, only 1.06 percent of mayors/chairs and 1.73 percent of deputy mayors/vice-chairs were from the Dalit community. This underrepresentation is attributed to political parties' reluctance to nominate Dalit candidates, often citing a lack of "qualified" individuals, a rationale criticized as a manifestation of entrenched caste biases (Pradhan, 2022).

At the provincial and federal levels, Dalit representation continues to lag. In the 2022 provincial elections, Dalits secured only 5.64 percent of seats across seven assemblies, with a mere three elected through the first-past-the-post system. This disparity underscores the need for more robust mechanisms to ensure Dalit inclusion in higher tiers of governance (Pradhan, 2022).

While legal frameworks have facilitated increased Dalit representation at the local level, significant barriers remain. Addressing these challenges requires not only policy reforms but also a concerted effort to dismantle societal prejudices and empower Dalit individuals to participate fully in Nepal's political landscape (Tolange, 2020).

BK (2023) investigated the marginalization of Dalits within Nepal's local governance structures. Despite constitutional provisions for inclusion, Dalits often remain excluded from decision-making processes. The research highlights how dominant caste groups monopolize executive positions, leading to the underrepresentation of Dalit voices in policy formulation and resource allocation. The study underscores the need for genuine inclusion beyond mere token representation.

Nepali (2020) explored the challenges Dalit politicians face due to entrenched caste hierarchies. It reveals that caste-based discrimination persists within political parties, hindering Dalit leaders' career progression and participation. The study calls for deconstructing caste-based barriers to ensure equitable political opportunities for Dalits.

Bhattarai and Pokharel (2022) examined the inclusivity of policymaking processes in Kirtipur Municipality. Findings indicate that, despite formal mechanisms for inclusion, Dalits and other marginalized groups are often excluded from meaningful participation. The research highlights the dominance of patriarchal mindsets and the need for capacity-building initiatives to empower marginalized communities in local governance.

Kafle (2023) focused on Terai Dalits this study delves into their socio-economic challenges, including landlessness, limited access to education and systemic discrimination. The research emphasizes the compounded marginalization faced by Dalit women and advocates for targeted interventions to address these disparities and promote inclusive development.

Bishwakarma (2022) criticized the paradox of political inclusion and persistent socio-economic exclusion of Dalits in rural Nepal. Despite policy initiatives aimed at development, Dalit communities often remain marginalized due to systemic barriers and lack of genuine political will. The study calls for a reevaluation of development strategies to ensure they address the root causes of Dalit exclusion.

The inclusive policies and programs of the state have made the local governments fill with Dalits and marginalized groups in diverse capacities of local governments. Despite the

Dalit representation in offices of local governance, the social and cultural processes in the caste hierarchy owning society result Dalits as sub-ordinates to the upper caste groups in the society. Resultantly, Dalits be they are elected or else in the society do not have their access and control over decision-making. Dalits still have a compulsion to rely on so-called high caste people due to unchanged power relations in the society (Dahal, 2021).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the position of Dalits in local governance in Nepal, with a focus on their historical marginalization and current participation barriers. The research is grounded in a comprehensive literature review approach, utilizing secondary data from a range of scholarly sources including journal articles, books, government reports and policy documents published between 2000 and 2025.

To gather relevant data, document analysis was employed as the primary method. This involved systematically reviewing academic literature, legal texts (e.g., the Constitution of Nepal, Local Level Election Act 2017) and published reports from institutions such as the National Dalit Commission and Samata Foundation. Thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns related to caste-based exclusion, representation gaps and participatory challenges faced by Dalits in both local and federal governance structures.

By synthesizing data from multiple qualitative sources, the study offers a critical and contextual understanding of how institutional, socio-cultural and historical factors have shaped Dalits' roles in governance. The methodology emphasizes interpretive analysis, aiming to understand the lived experiences, structural limitations and symbolic inclusion of Dalits in Nepal's democratic processes. This approach ensures a nuanced perspective without the bias of quantitative generalization.

Result and Discussion

This study investigates the historical and contemporary status of Dalits in Nepal's local governance, focusing on how caste-based discrimination continues to hinder their full participation in decision-making processes. Despite legal reforms and inclusive policies, Dalits still face marginalization due to deeply rooted socio-cultural hierarchies. The research underscores how traditional caste structures, institutional practices and unequal power relations limit Dalits' agency, even when they hold elected positions. The findings point to the persistent barriers to effective deliberation and inclusion in local governance, emphasizing the need for genuine systemic change to promote equality and ensure that the voices of historically oppressed communities are meaningfully heard and acted upon.

The caste system in Nepal, influenced by Hindu ideology, creates a rigid social hierarchy that positions Dalits at the lowest level. This system, supported by strict social rules and boundaries, has historically denied Dalits access to education, land ownership and participation in political processes. While constitutional guarantees and legal frameworks have been established to protect Dalit rights, they continue to face exclusion and discrimination in various forms, including limited access to public services such as healthcare and justice. Despite some legal interventions, the deeply embedded caste discrimination persists, often limiting Dalits' roles in governance and society.

At the local level, the implementation of the Local Level Election Act has led to the election of Dalit women in various positions, such as in ward committees. However, many elected Dalit women still face exclusion from key decision-making processes and report being marginalized within their respective committees. The study highlights that while legal frameworks have facilitated Dalit representation, significant challenges remain, including unfilled seats due to a lack of candidates and the persistence of caste-based discrimination in political parties. This leads to tokenistic representation without meaningful participation, particularly in higher executive roles.

In conclusion, the study finds that despite progress in legal representation, Dalits continue to face systemic barriers to full participation in local governance. The study calls for not only further policy reforms but also a deeper transformation of societal attitudes toward caste. To ensure that Dalits can participate fully and meaningfully in Nepal's democratic processes, it is essential to dismantle both the historical and contemporary barriers that continue to marginalize them. Only through these changes can genuine inclusion be achieved, allowing for a more equitable and representative governance system.

The study further highlights that, while significant strides have been made to ensure legal inclusion, the persistence of caste-based hierarchies in Nepal undermines true democratic engagement for Dalits. Even when Dalits are elected to local governance positions, their ability to influence decision-making remains constrained by entrenched social dynamics. Upper caste groups continue to dominate key leadership roles and traditional caste prejudices undermine Dalit representatives' authority. These power imbalances not only limit Dalits' capacity to act but also foster a sense of exclusion and disempowerment. Therefore, the need for systemic reform goes beyond legal measures to include societal transformation, aimed at breaking down cultural barriers and ensuring the active participation of Dalits in governance processes.

The participation of Dalits in local governance decision-making remains a complex issue, despite various legal and institutional frameworks aimed at ensuring their inclusion. Although the Local Level Election Act of 2017 mandates the inclusion of Dalit women in ward committees, their representation often remains symbolic, with many elected Dalit women facing discrimination and exclusion from key decision-making processes. Research has highlighted the limited presence of Dalits in executive roles, with only a small percentage of mayors and deputy mayors being from Dalit communities. This underrepresentation reflects the reluctance of political parties to nominate Dalit candidates, often citing the perceived lack of "qualified" individuals, a rationale that perpetuates caste-based biases.

Further, studies show that even when Dalit representatives are elected, they face significant challenges in exerting influence over policy formulation and resource allocation. Dominant caste groups often monopolize executive positions, marginalizing Dalit voices in governance. This exclusion is not only a result of legal and political barriers but also deeply rooted social prejudices that continue to undermine the capacity of Dalits to participate meaningfully in local governance.

Despite constitutional guarantees, the persistence of caste-based discrimination within political structures limits Dalits' ability to contribute to decision-making processes. Addressing this issue requires more than just legal reforms—it necessitates dismantling the societal barriers that restrict Dalits' full participation in governance and promoting genuine inclusion through capacity-building initiatives. Only through a comprehensive approach that includes both policy changes and a shift in societal attitudes can Dalit communities achieve meaningful participation in local governance.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while legal reforms in Nepal, such as the Local Level Election Act, have laid the foundation for Dalit representation in local governance, significant barriers to their meaningful participation persist. Deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination, rooted in historical and socio-cultural hierarchies, continues to limit Dalits' agency even when they hold elected positions. Their participation often remains symbolic, with limited influence in policy-making and resource allocation. Structural inequalities and dominant caste control over executive roles further marginalize Dalit voices. The persistence of societal prejudices and institutional exclusion undermines democratic ideals and reinforces inequality. Therefore, achieving genuine inclusion requires more than legal provisions—it calls for systemic transformation through societal attitude shifts, political will, and targeted capacity-building measures. Only by addressing both historical and contemporary barriers can Nepal ensure equitable participation of Dalits in governance, fostering a more inclusive and representative democratic system.

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