



Education Policies and Dalit Inclusion in Nepal: Uncovering Inequality, Exclusion and Structural Barriers

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Abstract

The Dalits have historically been considered untouchable in the traditional caste system of Nepal, excluding them from mainstream education. In this context, this study critically analyses Nepal's education policies and approaches to the Dalits' inclusion and access to education. Drawing information from the recorded documents as policy document analysis, this qualitative study discusses the provisions regarding exclusive and inclusive educational policies and practices in Nepal's education system. After the establishment of democracy in Nepal in 1951, schools were opened to the general public, including the Dalits. Since the 1980s, there have been efforts to bring the Dalits into the mainstream education system. However, reproduction of caste-based discrimination in policymaking has challenged the complete inclusion of the Dalits in education. Although the policies encouraging the oppressed people in the field of education have helped them in schooling, they are still inadequate. The education policy of Nepal has evolved in rhetoric but continues to fall short in practice. The persistence of caste-based discrimination and neglecting cultural capital in schooling indicates that without principled, structural changes, Dalit exclusion in education will persist. Bridging this gap requires critical engagement with both policy and practice through inclusive, justice-oriented frameworks informed by structural and cultural theories. Both policies and practices are necessary to reduce caste-based discrimination and poverty, change social and school practices, modify curricula and work collaboratively. Developing effective policy and practice for inclusion is a valuable commitment. Therefore, this suggests restructuring the education system changing the mindset of the policy makers, planners and teachers.

Keywords: Caste-system, restructuring, untouchability, mainstream education

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Introduction

The Dalits constitute about 13.4 percent of Nepal's total population of 29.2 million (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2021). Nepali society is characterized by a hierarchical and authoritarian structure system. In a caste-based society, the Dalits are a group suffering from inhuman behaviour like caste discrimination and untouchability. Untouchability refers to the Hindu religious belief that the so-called upper castes are unclean when they have physical contact with the so-called lower castes. The belief of untouchability is related to human pollution (Bhattachan et al., 2009). However, the impact of such situations on the educational, social, economic, and psychological aspects of the Dalits in Nepal has been the least studied area.

The most important factor in the caste structure is the treatment of the Dalits as untouchables, which has historically deprived them of education in traditional Hindu society (Chalaune, 2020). The Dalits are such a community that has for centuries been economically exploited, politically excluded, socially oppressed, religiously/culturally untouchable, and educationally deprived. The oppression and discrimination of the Dalits in the education system is a widespread problem in Nepal. Inhuman and discriminatory practices such as segregation, social exclusion and physical abuse persist in different forms of education from primary to university level (International Dalit Solidarity Network [IDSN], 2009). There are low literacy and enrollment rates, and high dropout, repetition, and failure rate among the Dalits, due to some social and physical factors. In addition, a large number of school-age Dalit children are out of school. The majority of school enrolled children drop out of school within the first three years (Poudel, 2007). Only 20% of Dalit children of primary school age appear to be enrolled in basic education, and 6% of them are enrolled in high school level (UNESCO, 2011). In Nepal, the enrollment rate of the Dalits is also less than their size of the population. National enrollment in higher education is 17.6%, but the Dalits average is 3.8%. Only 15% of the total Dalit population attain education, which is about half of the national average (Bhattachan et al., 2009). It is clear that social inequality is widespread in society. Untouchability and discriminatory practices do not help in creating an appropriate educational environment for schooling of Dalit children.

The trend of untouchability and inequality still exists in the Nepali society. The culture of the upper classes or castes has been dominant. Curriculum developers, planners, managers, and teachers are all influenced by social culture and norms. Therefore, the education system continues to reproduce the discriminatory culture prevailing in society (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Consequently, schooling has been reproducing structural inequality and discrimination. As Nepali schools are reproducing the discriminatory attitudes and practices prevailing in the society, marginalized groups and the Dalits are being deprived in every aspect of life. Therefore, they do not

get much benefit from schooling education (Koirala, 1996; Poudel, 2007). This has directly or indirectly affected the education of Dalit children. As a result, Dalit children do not come to school, even if they do, they drop out. Nevertheless, something has changed compared to the past.

This study focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of education policy in bringing the Dalits into the mainstream of society. In this context, the purpose of this study is to critically analyze how Nepali education policy and its approaches have failed to provide the necessary support to bring the Dalits into the mainstream of education. In addition, the purpose of this study is to analyze the inclusion and exclusion of the Dalits in the policies and plans from the past to the present.

Despite various policy reforms, the Dalits in Nepal continue to face systemic exclusion in education. There is limited critical analysis of how education policies have addressed and failed to address Dalit inclusion. This article is needed to analyse the gaps in government policy implementation and support inclusive educational reform. It aims to highlight the structural inequalities reproduced through educational planning and practice.

Methods and Procedures

This study is based on the policy document analysis method of qualitative study. To achieve the purpose of the study, I first of all searched the relevant policy documents (e.g. *First five year plan 1956-1961*; *Report of High Level Education Commission 1998*; *National Education System Plan 1971-1975*; *Education in Nepal 1956*; *Fifth Plan 1970-1975*; *Sixth Five Years Plan 1980-85*; *Seventh Plan 1985-1990*; *The Eighth Plan 1992*; *Ninth Plan 1997-2002*; *Tenth plan 2002-2007*; *The Tenth Plan Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper 2002-2007*; *Three year (interim) Eleventh plan 2007-2010*; *Three Year Twelfth Plan 2010-2013*; *Three Year Thirteenth Plan 2013-2016*; *Fifteenth Plan 2020-2025*) from archives including some papers about Nepal's education policy. Then, using inductive thematic analysis, documents were read and re-read to identify the provisions in relation to the issues concerning the Dalits in mainstream education. Thus, this study depends on the secondary sources such as the report of the Commission, government policy and planning, articles, books, etc., regarding the issues of the Dalits in education. In this review, I followed a qualitative descriptive approach to the various provisions regarding exclusive and inclusive education policy and practice. Using analytical and evaluation methods, this study also extends to understanding policy approaches.

Trustworthiness was ensured by cross-referencing multiple sources and verifying consistency across periods. The study focuses on understanding how educational policy frameworks have shaped Dalit inclusion or exclusion.

Results and Discussion

In this section, I have discussed the findings drawn from the policy documents concerning the Dalits in mainstream education in Nepal. These findings are presented thematically and analysed critically.

Education Policy Concerning the Dalits

Nepal has never been a colony of any nation in history and has remained an independent nation. However, the history of formal education in Nepal is relatively short. The formal school started in the Rana period. The Rana period began in 1846 and ended in 1951. During this period, Nepal's education system was influenced by the British education system. The first formal school in Nepal was established in 1854 when the then ruler, Jung Bahadur Rana, returned from a visit to England. Unfortunately, this school was established only to provide education in English to the children of the Rana family, especially the children of Jung Bahadur Rana, who was the ruler of the upper castes (Bista, 1991). During the Rana period, the Dalits were legally untouchable and it was impossible for them to get an education. Therefore, neither the common people of other castes were educated, nor were the Dalits allowed to get an education during the Rana regime.

The oppressors do not want the development of the whole society. They only want to be the rulers of the oppressed people. Any activities they work are to marginalise and divide people to maintain their power and supremacy (Freire, 1970). The Ranas were the oppressors and autocratic rulers. They never wanted the development of the entire country because they always wanted to be the rulers to rule the common people. Thus, the Ranas merely persecuted the common people in their favour without providing any opportunity to maintain power and domination. As a result, only 2% of people were literate during the entire Rana period (Bista, 1991). In addition, in 1950, there were less than 330 schools across the country (Sharma, 2006). Therefore, the Rana period is known as the dark age of education in the history of Nepal.

After the end of the autocratic Rana rule in 1951, the democratic system was introduced in Nepal. Since then, educational institutions have started to open for the common people in Nepal. Since the mid-1950s, Nepal has initiated a planned approach to development in various fields, including education. New political changes took place in the country, but the British model of education system was followed. The schools that have developed since then have followed the structure and pattern of education in this area, especially in the Indian subcontinent (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2000). The Ministry of Education was established in 1952, especially for the development of school education in the country. Although some special schools and training centers

already exist, the current structure is directly related to the political changes of 1951 and the 1954 Commission.

The report prepared by the Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC-1954) was the first effort to prepare an extensive education policy in Nepal; the education policies in the First Five Year Plan (1956–1960) were also based on the report of NNEPC (Government of Nepal, 1956). However, the Commission's report and the first five-year plan did not address the issue of education for the Dalit communities, which was lagging behind in the mainstream of education. Reviewing the progress of the 8th Plan, the 9th Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) noted that the weaker groups, scheduled castes, backward class children and the people living in remote areas were deprived of access to primary education (National Planning Commission [NPC], 1997). For the first time, the issue of Dalit education was explicitly included in Nepal's policy document. The 9th Plan emphasized providing educational opportunities to the children of backward caste groups and oppressed classes (ibid.). During the period of the 5th Five Year Plan (1970-1975), it was made free of cost to students studying in government elementary schools. In addition, with the launch of the 6th Five-Year Plan (1980-1985), the government has provided free textbooks to students studying in government elementary schools and raised scholarship quotas for Dalit students. However, due to the low amount of scholarships, it was not possible for Dalit students coming from poor communities to cover the need for stationery, school uniform, lunch, etc. The 10th Plan (2002-2007) announced a similar amount of scholarships for all primary Dalit children and an extension of the scholarships to secondary schools on the basis of the quota.

With the changed political situation, a three-year interim plan (2007-2010) was formulated. The Interim Plan embodied the spirit of political change and the Interim Constitution (2007). The plan specifically emphasized the spirit of inclusive democracy, social justice, social inclusion, rights-based, independent and universal basic and primary education, and ensuring primary education in the mother tongue. Emphasis was also placed on free education up to secondary level and meeting the educational needs of the weaker sections. The Interim Plan also continued the key relevant strategies and key aspects of the 10th Plan (MOE, 2007). National policies and plans are implemented through a system of schools, campuses, universities, and education of non-formal provisions. However, Dalit Scholarship is an important program to increase the access of Dalit children to education. Although the implementation is not effective as per its purpose, there are public complaints that the target group has not been able to get the scholarship. The scholarship has been misused by teachers and School Management Committees. Targeted students do not usually get scholarships easily (Bhattachan et al., 2009). Similarly, policies are not clear on who needs scholarships. There is also an economic class within the Dalits. Due to the provision of keeping the economically

well-off children in the scope of scholarship in the name of Dalit, the real poor children seem to be deprived of the necessary opportunities.

The 11th three-year plan (2007-2010) announced the following provisions for Dalit students:

- Dalit students enrolled in schools will be provided stipends and other incentive schemes from the primary to secondary level.
- The Dalit Civil Society and School Management Committee will sign a formal prospectus for 100 schools in densely populated Dalit areas to ensure that the allocated funds and grants to Dalit school children are properly utilized. In addition, caste discrimination will be stopped within the school.
- Necessary seats will be reserved for Dalit students to study in higher education scholarships in the country and abroad.
- Hostels for low-income Dalit students in the development region will be started and existing hostels will be strengthened.
- Proportional accommodation will be provided for Dalit students in the existing hostels.
- Measures will be taken to gradually provide education in their mother tongue for non-Nepali-speaking Dalit children. (NPC, 2007).

The main program run by the government to support the education of the Dalits is free education including Dalit scholarships. The government has some provisions from school-level scholarships to higher education scholarships. Although the provisions made for Dalits are inadequate, there seems to be some progress in the education of Dalit children. Currently, Dalit children's participation in school is on the rise, but these reforms are still limited and the Dalit situation is still weak (Bhattachan et al., 2009). Updated information on the Dalit is also still lacking. Poverty, prevailing narrow social values and norms, low access to education, lack of inclusive and equitable approach in plan formulation and implementation process, are prevailing problems (NPC, 2010, 2013; UNESCO, 2015). The facts and evidence show that the level of Dalit enrolment in schools is increasing but there is still a big challenge of retention in and stop dropouts of Dalit children from schools.

The government is waiving the fees for students from the Dalits and other underprivileged communities up to the tenth grade, in addition to the scholarship program for Dalit students at public primary and secondary schools. The government policy encompassed various measures, such as offering scholarships to students from underprivileged communities, including the Dalits, in private schools, regulating the fees of private schools, utilizing a proposed levy from private schools for education to marginalized communities, and handing over school management to the community (NPC, 2002, 2013). The government believes that by implementing these new programs,

the Dalits and other underprivileged groups will be more likely to attend school (NPC, 2002, MOE, 2016). However, quota scholarships in higher education, other suggested programs and changes, and offering a small number of scholarships to Dalit students enrolled in primary and secondary levels as well as waiving fees for Dalit children up to grade ten have not produced the anticipated outcomes (Department of Education) [DOE], 2006, NPC, 2013; UNESCO, 2015).

In such a situation, it is not possible to bring the Dalits into the mainstream of education without a radical change in the exclusionary value system and discriminatory mentality. There was a policy provision that the Dalits will be given priority in appointing school teachers, but this does not seem to have come into practice. The 10th Plan mentioned that the participation of Dalits in educational institutions is very low or nominal. Therefore, to increase the participation of the Dalits in the teaching profession, especially Dalit women will be given priority. If women teachers are not available, then Dalit men will be appointed (NPC, 2002). In practice, it is difficult to find such cases giving preferences to recruiting the Dalit teachers. However, after the change in 2007, some quotas in the appointment of permanent teachers have been set aside for the Dalits.

In addition, the Ninth and Tenth Plans included special programs for the Dalits. With the formation of the National Dalit Commission in 2002, it opened the door for Dalit educators and activists to participate in some aspects of the government's policy process. However, the meaningful involvement of the Dalits in the state's policy-making and decision-making process is still questionable, as the mindset of policymakers is based on old schooling. Reviewing the progress of the 10th Plan, the three-year Interim Plan (2007-2010) stated that the annual expenditure of the state for primary and secondary education of the Dalits was Rs.150 million. Overall, the level of education has improved in the national average years of schooling with a relatively 3.62 years, while that of the Dalits is 2.1 years (NPC, 2007).

Compared to the various education commissions, after the 1990s democratic changes, the education commissions suggested some positive measures about the poor and marginalized communities, including the Dalits. At the same time, these reports suggested Education for All (EFA), which was an important step towards the development of universal basic education. HLNEC (1998) stated that the responsibility of the government for education on the basis of social justice should be concentrated in the Dalit, marginalized, disabled, and remote areas (HLNEC, 1998). On the other hand, discriminatory practices have been influenced by conventional hierarchical and exclusionary mindset.

However, despite the widespread access to education since 1990, Nepal's approach to education policy has been influenced by neoliberalism, which has not been able to bring the weaker sections of society into the mainstream education. As in

Sowton's findings (Sowton, 2004, as cited in Poudel, 2007), the Nepalese education system does not seem to be able to help marginalized sections including the Dalits, those who are already deprived from education and other facilities for various reasons. Instead, economically prosperous, urbanized communities, educated and conscious about educational rights and needs have gained more opportunities.

Efforts for the Inclusion of the Dalits

After the political changes of 1990, the impact of liberalization and globalization in Nepal's education policy, as well as the expansion of education, accelerated. As a result, Nepal's education policy and direction have been changed. Issues such as rights-based education, education for all, and inclusion became the subject of debate. Along with this, the private sector in education expanded rapidly beginning the foreign aid in education.

With this, the international movement on EFA is an influential force on inclusive education thereby developing the concept of policies. The World Conference on Education for 1990, international concern and cooperation, as well as the national focus of many countries, has been directed towards Universal Primary Education (UNESCO, 2015; Kamanda & Sankoh, 2015). One of the mainstays of the EFA movement was the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which ratifies the right of education to children. The guiding principles of 'Salamanca's statements' A Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) incorporated the concept of inclusive schools and education.

The Dakar Conference (2000) clearly incorporated important aspects of inclusive education as education for all (UNESCO, 2000). It acknowledged the need for inclusive education in the Dakar Framework for Action. Booth (2003, 2003) noted that the EFA is an ethical and political movement that develops a global education system based on equality, rights, participation, and respect for diversity. In this sense, EFA's policies are based on the essence of inclusive education.

Adopting six EFA goals passed by the Dakar Conference, another goal in the Nepali context was also included. The added goal was to ensure the rights of indigenous and linguistic minorities in basic and primary education through their mother tongue (MOE, 2003). The following three EFA goals are directly associated with the educational inclusion of Dalit children:

- Early childhood care and education will be expanded and improved, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- To ensure free access and good quality compulsory primary education for all children, especially girls, children with disabilities, difficult circumstances, ethnic minority and Dalits by 2015.

- By 2015, adult literacy will improve by 100 percent and equal access to basic and continuing education will be provided for all adults. (MOES, 2003)

The Government of Nepal has introduced some policies to help the Dalits in the mainstream education. The 7th Amendment to the Education Act 2001 stipulates that primary school education in community schools will be free for all, textbooks will be provided free of charge. It was also mentioned that free education will be provided to Dalit, Janjati, girls and very poor students studying in community schools and private schools should provide scholarships to 10% poor students (MOE, 2001). Similarly, an inclusive provision within the Annual Strategic Implementation Plan (ASIP, 2006) made clear the need for system of inclusive education. It is assumed that all children have the ability to learn whether a conducive environment is ensured. It suggested that excluded children should be recognized at risk of dropping out in a particular context, and the process needed to be facilitated that is sensitive to social, cultural, and educational needs. The plan mentioned that the existing economic, social, and geographical obstruction against inclusion in education of backward and weaker sections including the Dalits will be addressed through various measures. It also includes policy reforms to increase and enhance the inclusion of teachers from traditional marginalized communities. Likewise, the School Sector Reforms Project (SSRP, 2009-2015) aimed at equal participation in basic education similarly as ensuring equal access to quality education through a rights-based approach and promotion of a child-friendly environment in schools Target adopted (DOE, 2014). School Sector Development Plan (2016-2023) focuses on increasing access for those with the lowest access to education on the basis of inclusion and equity (MOE, 2016).

Similarly, the Constitutions of Nepal (2015) reflects the spirit of the interim constitution, ensuring special safeguards for the proportional inclusion and educational uplift of the Dalits and enable the state to make a special arrangement for their educational progress. The special provisions as given in by Article 40 (1 and 2) are follows:

- Dalits will have the right to fully participate within the state-supported agencies on the principle of proportional inclusion. There'll be special legal provisions for empowerment, representation, and participation of the Dalit community for employment in other fields including general public service.
- Provision of free education with scholarships for Dalit students from first to higher-level education are going to be provided for the law. Special provisions within the law are going to be made for education in technical and vocational subjects for Dalits.

National Education Policy (2019) emphasizes the policy of zero-tolerance against untouchability to extend the access of Dalit children to education. The strategies adopted by the government is to encourage students to get access and acquire equity, to give priority to women, Dalits, indigenous and underprivileged communities in teacher recruitment, optimize for inclusive education, and for parents to provide income generating literacy program, optimize for inclusive education, and for parents to provide income generating literacy program (NPC, 2007). However, Dalit children have less access to education than children from other caste groups. Madeshi Dalits in particular seem to have very little access. Furthermore, the ratio of Dalit teachers is very low in comparison to the percentage of their population (DOE, 2014). In this sense, ineffective plans and programs were insusceptible to the Dalits and other marginalized groups. Therefore, it has not achieved this target within the expected time.

Although Nepal has revised its laws and rules according to several matters, many such provisions remain to be developed to address issues associated with equity, social justice, and social inclusion. For example, there is still no regulation or act to ensure rights-based education or compulsory education. There is no act or regulation with respect to minimum teaching conditions or quality standards of institutions. Obstruction-free is a commitment to education. However, there is no legislative measure to translate this commitment into actual practice at school.

Despite constitutional provisions and targeted programs, the education system continues to reflect the structural and symbolic domination of upper-caste culture. According to Bourdieu, education systems reinforce inequality by rewarding students who already possess the dominant cultural capital. In Nepal, this means that the language, content, norms, and expectations of schools often alienate Dalit students, contributing to low retention and achievement.

Insufficient Education Policy for the Dalits

With the democratic change in 1951, public education began in Nepal. The NNEPC, formed by the government, suggested what Nepal's future education system would look like. (NNEPC, 1954). Nepal's 1st Five Year Plan (1956-61) set out an education policy with the objective of universal primary education, national education, and education based on individual needs (Government of Nepal, 1956). However, the objectives set out by the commission and the plan were contradictory, and the policies were vague. Just as the national nature of education, and education based on individual needs, were not only contradictory but also unclear. Similarly, policies such as single curriculum and language policy, uniformity in teaching methods, cannot address social diversity and individual differences. Although it was a milestone in the history of educational development in Nepal, it was only useful for certain sections of society

and communities. At the same time, schools began to open, expand, enroll students, and increase public interest in education. But for the Dalits, it was not possible to easily enter schools due to the practice of caste based untouchability.

The All Round National Education Committee (ARNEC) report recommended the purpose of education, with emphasis on traditional culture and the preparation of citizens who remain loyal to the panchayat system and the king (ARNEC, 1962). The 3rd Five Year Plan stated that every citizen would be provided equal opportunities and facilities for their personality and economic progress. The plan mentioned that the government would adopt a policy providing primary school facilities to all children by 1980, and that priority would be given to those schools that provided free and compulsory education. However, the plan did not mention anything about the education of marginalized groups including the Dalits. On the other hand, it referred to the contradictory program of reducing government grants in primary schools (National Planning Council, 1965).

Documents in the 4th Five Year Plan (1970–75) showed that only 18% of primary school students were enrolled in secondary education in primary education. In relation to the opening of secondary schools in the plan, it was said that during the plan period necessary restrictions would be imposed on the opening of schools and emphasis would be given on strengthening and improving the existing ones (NPC, 1970). Public education initiated in Nepal indicates that the education policy did not attempt to educate all citizens but limited some. At the same time, under the NESP 1971, the school system was completely controlled by the bureaucracy.

During the 5th Plan period, the education system was governmentized and nationalized, and the management of schools came under bureaucratic control. Primary schools continued to expand during the 5th (1975-1980) and 6th (1980-1985) Five Year Plans. During this period, the government introduced free primary education as well as free textbooks. It clarified the state's accountability to the education of its citizens, but the government's intentions were unclear, and the centralized system did not increase public participation in school education. As a result, the quality of education was poor and not everyone had access to education. Similarly, when the school could not be untouchable, Dalit children did not come to school and those who came, started dropping out.

The NESP focused on the legitimacy of Panchayat rule. This represented a more aggressive attempt to mold the Nepalese nation into a particular image that served the interests of Panchayat rulers (Cadell, 2002). The interests of the rulers were stated in the NESP document as the goals of education, to strengthen devotion to the crown, the country, national unity and the Panchayat system; developing similar traditions in education by bringing different paradigms together under one national policy; to limit the tradition of ethnic and regional diversity of languages; to encourage financial and social mobility, and to supply the manpower requirements necessary for national development (MOE, 1971)

Privatization in schools began during the Sixth Plan period. During the Seventh Plan period, the expansion of private schools was believed to create a competitive environment in education. This encouraged only private schools but did not encourage public schools to compete with others. Regarding private schooling, the 7th Plan allowed for the establishment of secondary schools in the private sector on the basis of public participation. The plan believed that the establishment of private schools would create a sense of competitiveness and enhance the quality of education (NPC, 1985). The neoliberal policy agenda in education was intensified during this 7th Plan period, which continued in private and competitive schools in the successive 8th, 9th, 10th five-year plans and 11th (interim), 12th, 13th and 14th (three-year plans) and recently 15th five-year plans. Education for private and competitive schools and human capital were policy approaches in the Nepalese educational plan. However, centralized, national and single curricula for schooling, bureaucratic control centralized planning, single and government-produced textbooks for public schools, a traditional form of teaching practice, and centralized testing and grading in educational policy and practice continues. Furthermore, after the establishment of the Federal Republic of Nepal, decentralization has been constitutionally accepted. However, due to traditional thinking, there are problems in its practical implementation. Lewis states that the decentralization process is an important foundation for increased access to education for all and for real inclusion. However, there is a need for greater clarity in Nepal on how the goals of inclusive education can be adopted in local level planning processes (Lewis & Little, 2007). These issues are to the neoliberal and neo-conservative paradox in educational policymaking. In addition, with the opening of private schools, the educational quality of community schools has deteriorated and government schools have become places of study for socially backward and economically poor children. This has created a huge gap between the haves and have-nots. As a result, Dalit children living with conditions of social discrimination and poverty do not seem to be attracted to schooling.

Since the first plan, most of the planning documents of the Nepalese government have mentioned piloting or the preparation of free and compulsory primary education. Such vague statements have also been seen in the recent 15th Plan document. For example, without mentioning any time frame or programs, it referred to the gradual implementation of the program for compulsory and free basic primary education (NPC, 2020). Again, primary education was said to be free but in reality education was not free. Free textbooks and tuition fees alone did not meet the basic needs of poor children including the Dalits. It does not cover the cost of school uniforms, food, and stationery. In addition, 44% of public-school primary level teachers are working on low pay based on private resources. Tuition fees are charged from the students for their salary (Chalaune, 2015).

With a policy-making history of over seven decades, education policies have not been able to contribute significantly to bring the Dalits into the mainstream education. Due to caste based untouchability and exclusion, hierarchical social practices and economic tightness, the Dalits do not seem to be able to participate in education as expected. Similarly, the privatization of school education and the traditional thinking of policy makers have a negative impact on inclusive and equitable education. Private schools are out of reach of excluded groups due to high costs. At the same time, education policymakers, bureaucrats and teachers in public educational institutions are promoting private education and discouraging public education. It has created a narrative that public school education is not useful. Such practices are weakening public schools. Private education, which is only accessible to a certain class, reinforces exclusionary practices rather than inclusion. Similarly, the education policy has not made the expected contribution to include the Dalits in education. However, with Nepal's international commitment to education for all and inclusive education, discussions have begun since the 1990s on policy measures to bring the Dalits into the mainstream education and reduce exclusion. As a result, some targeted programs for the Dalits have been included in subsequent policies. However, the education policy has not contributed enough to include the Dalits in education, as the policy and practice have not contributed to the change in exclusionary values, cultural capital and hegemony. In addition, there is confusion about how to define inclusive education and how it relates to the concept of quality education in Nepal (Lewis & Little, 2007).

The current education system is unable to address many of the challenges that children from underprivileged education bring to schools. Most Dalits do not find current education relevant and inclusive in the sense to them that there is no provision for children below the poverty line in school. No social discrimination issues are discussed in school. Similarly, there is no educational practice to boost the morale of children in social exclusion. There is no provision to include the traditional technology of the Dalits in the curriculum and contribute to its development. Such an environment in schools is creating a sense of inferiority in them. Likewise, they do not see the difference between school activities and discrimination in society. As a result, many Dalit children drop out from school, and even graduates find it difficult to find work. Moreover, the lack of modernization of their traditional skills has led to difficulties in making a living.

Policy Approaches in Nepalese Education

By the 1980s, educational policies and plans in Nepal were completely controlled and centralized. The curriculum was centralized aiming to reproduce traditional values and practices. As a result, the education system has failed to reduce social inequality

and caste hierarchy. Similarly, educational opportunities were mainly focused on the so-called rich, noble and upper castes. The main intention of education was to recognize a language, Hindu values including the domination of the king, culture and values of the ruling and elite classes. There was no agenda to include the Dalits in any policy. However, despite tolerating many discriminations and barriers, a small number of the Dalits living in and around urban areas had the opportunity to attend school. But overall Education was more beneficial especially for a certain section of the society.

After the political changes of the 1990s, the Nepalese state bureaucrats and policymakers were still influenced by neo-conservatism with its centralized curriculum, national examination, and bureaucratic control. At the same time, the neo-liberal approach of the World Bank, which only supported competitive privatization, was put forward. With Nepal's entry into the liberal democratic system, the policy makers were greatly influenced by liberalism. The state's neo-liberal policy led to quantitative changes in education but there is a clear distinction between the rich and the poor in education. Consequently, the education policy developed on the basis of neo-liberalism as well as neo-conservatism was contradictory in itself from the point of view of social justice.

After the political changes in 2006, the new constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal (2015) was promulgated. The new constitution emphasizes the principles of social justice, inclusion, and decentralization. As per the guidelines of the constitution, educational policies and plans seem to emphasize the approach of human resource development based on justice. For example, the Education Policy (2020) emphasizes ensuring adequate, equitable, and return-oriented educational investment based on national priorities to fulfill the constitutional and legal obligation to obtain education (MOE, 2020). Likewise, the 15th five-year plan (2019 /20 - 2023/24) underlines the goal of making education equitable, inclusive, quality, life-skilled, and technology-friendly by ensuring free and compulsory basic education with experience in early childhood education and free access to education up to secondary level (NPC, 2020). Therefore, the constitution of Nepal created an important opportunity for the development of an inclusive environment in education. School level education is within the jurisdiction of the local level government. This has created an environment of collaborative participation of local government and community in school management. Positive results can be expected from this. In a diverse society like Nepal, when local governments exercise their authority, including the autonomy of school management, they can contribute significantly to making education more effective according to local needs and priorities (Faguet, 2013, as cited in Neupane, 2019). However, lack of necessary experience and resources can pose a challenge to the effective exercise of delegated rights. Similarly, there are various policies and plans at the national level to support the right to education and inclusive

education of marginalized groups including the Dalits, but lack of proper knowledge and manpower can lead to problems in planning and implementation. There is still some confusion among policymakers and implementers about the nature of inclusive education. Legally the responsibility for conducting school level education is vested in the local government. But due to the centralized mentality of the bureaucracy, there does not seem to be a clear policy arrangement for delegation of power. It is not yet clear how planning processes at the local level can embrace inclusive education goals.

The current educational policy has provided constitutional guidance to establish the role and participation of the private sector in education as a basis for socialist-oriented socio-economic transformation by making public education quality, equitable and inclusive by regulating it as per the needs of the state. However, despite the quantitative expansion in education in Nepal, the expected target in terms of quality has not been achieved. As a result, the gap between the rich and the poor in education is widening and a large number of children from marginalised communities, including the Dalits, are out of reach of basic education. The dropout rate is also relatively high among those who go to school.

Conclusion

Various democratic movements in Nepal have attempted the Dalits provide educational opportunities. However, it does not appear to have yielded the desired results. The main reason for this is the reproduction of discriminatory culture in the educational system. Additionally, the domination and hegemony of caste have been affecting education policymaking. According to Gramsci, the state and social hegemony are a process of maintaining the status quo, within which the ruling class controls the general public using intellectuals and moral leadership (Harinath, 2013).

To bring the Dalits into mainstream and inclusive education, there needs to be an integrated approach to respond to multiple discriminatory and exclusionary pressures on them. Policies and practices need to reduce discrimination, eradicate poverty, change social and school practices, change curricula, and create opportunities to work together. It seems necessary to integrate the traditional skills and technology of the Dalits, in particular, into the school curriculum. Formulating an effective policy for the inclusion of the Dalits in education is a human value commitment. However, policymakers and practitioners lacking a value commitment to inclusion are still a major obstacle to mainstreaming the Dalits in education.

Educational activities need to be directed towards the development and implementation of inclusive values and these values need to be incorporated into practice. It is necessary to create an environment based on justice for the active participation of the Dalits in the educational process. Priorities in teacher appointments and school

management committees, increasing scholarships for economically disadvantaged Dalit children, providing financial aid to parents and respecting the occupation of the Dalits in schools, and legal assistance can help Dalit children with meaningful access to schools. In addition, for the inclusion of Dalit children in education, teachers must change their attitude towards the Dalits as well as their teaching strategy. Traditional caste attitudes towards the Dalits and structural changes, as well as participation of the Dalits in the decision-making process and economic incentives to the poor Dalits can facilitate the educational inclusion of the Dalits.

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