



Roads to change: The Karnali highway and occupational shift among Dalits in Nepal

Rama Shrestha

Social Development Expert Department of Road

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Corresponding Author

Rama Shrestha

rama.shrestha@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates occupational transformations among Dalit households in Dahikhola-Chhati, a remote village in Nepal's Karnali Province, following the construction of the Karnali Highway. Employing qualitative methodologies and grounded in classical sociological theories: Functionalism, Marxism, and Symbolic Interactionism, the research explores how improved infrastructure strengthens economic diversification and social mobility in historically marginalized communities. The data for the study were collected through in-depth interviews, case studies, and field observations with 51 Dalit households. The findings reveal a significant shift away from hereditary, caste-based occupations such as blacksmithing and tailoring toward wage labor, small-scale entrepreneurship, and professional careers. This transition is accompanied by increased income diversity, expanded market access, gender empowerment, and greater participation in education and migration. The Karnali Highway has not only physically connected geographically isolated communities but also has symbolically disrupted entrenched caste hierarchies.

By analyzing these lived experiences, the study illustrates how infrastructure can act as a catalyst for both economic empowerment and identity reconstruction. It depicts the role of mobility, not only physical but also social and symbolic, in reshaping the aspirations and trajectories of Dalit communities. This research, hopefully, contributes to development and sociological discourse by demonstrating that inclusive infrastructure projects can serve as transformative forces for social justice and caste equity in post-caste rural societies.

Keywords

Dalits, occupational shift, infrastructure development, Karnali Highway, caste system, economic and social transformation

Introduction

Karnali Province, located in the northwestern part of Nepal, is the country's largest province by area (30,716.23 km²) but the least populated, with 1,570,418 inhabitants. Economically, Karnali is characterized by a small-scale, subsistence-based agricultural system, with around 80% of its population engaged in agriculture, fishing, or livestock rearing. The province ranks lowest on national economic indicators, with a per capita income of only USD 274. One of the key developmental challenges is the lack of connectivity between the remote northern mountain regions and the southern hills and valleys. The construction of the 233-kilometer Karnali Highway, which connects Surkhet to Jumla via Dailekh and Kalikot, has significantly improved regional connectivity. The Highway has enabled access to markets and services and opening pathways for socio-economic transformation. The highway has also raised hopes for unlocking potentials of sectors such as hydropower, tourism, medicinal herbs, minerals, and organic agriculture.

One of the villages affected by this infrastructural development is Shubha Kalika Rural Municipality (SKRM) in Kalikot District. Historically marked by isolation, underdevelopment, and entrenched caste-based hierarchies, this area is rich in natural resources and home to a resilient population. This study focuses on Dahikhola-Chhati, Ward-1 of SKRM, with 917 residents across 133 households, including 51 Dalit, 46 Aadibasi Janajatis, and 36 Brahmin/Chhetri households (Ward Profile, 2018/19).

Construction of Karnali Highway was begun in 2000 and completed in 2015. It serves as a vital lifeline for this previously inaccessible region. Infrastructure, particularly roads, plays a transformative role in catalyzing economic development and social change by enhancing access to education, healthcare, markets, and employment. In this regard, this study investigates the extent and nature of occupational shifts among Dalit households in Dahikhola-Chhati following the Highway's completion, examining how improved connectivity affects caste-based labor structures and livelihood diversification.

Significance of the study

This research explores how the development of infrastructure, specifically Karnali Highway, has brought about significant occupational shifts among Dalit households in a remote area of Nepal. For generations, Dalits were confined to low-paying, caste-based occupations passed down through hereditary systems. These roles not only perpetuated economic hardship but also reinforced rigid social hierarchies.

Following the construction of the Highway, Dalit families in Dahikhola-Chhati began transitioning into wage labor, small businesses, driving, construction, and overseas employment. This shift represents not only an economic transition but also a reconfiguration of social identities and community aspirations. New income sources have facilitated access to education, improved health outcomes, enhanced gender empowerment, and increased mobility. Women and youth, in particular, have found new opportunities for participation and autonomy.

This study is significant because it offers an in-depth, localized understanding of how road infrastructure can serve as a catalyst for social transformation. Unlike many impact assessments that narrowly focus on travel time or traffic volumes, this research foregrounds the lived experiences of marginalized communities. It analyzes how changes in occupational status impact social mobility, household economies, and individual dignity. It fills a critical gap in infrastructure studies by providing detailed insight into what ‘occupational shift’ and ‘economic empowerment’ actually mean in practices, especially for historically excluded populations

Theoretical Debates

This study draws on three classical sociological theories: Functionalism, Marxism, and Symbolic Interactionism, each offering distinct and often contrasting perspectives on social reality. Functionalist theory views society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability and order. It assumes that structural and functional differentiations are natural and necessary. From this perspective, social stratification is seen as inevitable, ensuring that roles are distributed based on ability and importance, thus motivating individuals to fulfill positions essential for societal survival. Functionalists argue that no society is classless, and that stratification maintains social equilibrium. In contrast, Marxist theory interprets occupation and class structure through the lens of inequality and exploitation inherent in capitalist systems. Stratification, from Marxist viewpoint, is not a functional necessity but a mechanism of control by the ruling class to maintain dominance. Occupations are tied to one’s relationship with the means of production, and inequality arises from the economic system itself. Marxism advocates for structural change to reduce disparity and promote social justice.

Symbolic Interactionism, though more focused on micro-level, offers valuable insight into how stratification shapes individuals’ identities, interactions, and lived experiences. While it may not directly address systemic inequality, it emphasizes how roles and positions within the stratification system influence beliefs, self-perception, lifestyle, and daily interactions. As Haralambos (1980:160) notes, the poor must be viewed not in isolation, but as part of the broader stratification

system. Symbolic interaction draws attention to the socially constructed nature of meaning and how occupations carry symbolic weight that shapes social reality.

Traditionally, caste-based occupations among Dalits included blacksmithing, goldsmith tailoring, shoemaking, street cleaning, and singing. These roles were often hereditary and tied to oppressive systems such as *Balighare* and *Hali Pratha*, which bound Dalit families to unpaid or underpaid labor in exchange for in-kind compensation usually, food or goods rather than fair wages. These systems functioned as forms of bonded labor that severely restricted Dalits' mobility and opportunities. The lack of land ownership further entrenched their marginalized status. As described in *RR Interdisciplinary Journal* (Vol. 4, No. 4, December 2023, pp. 122–132), these traditionally assigned artisan roles were part of a kind-based payment system that did not constitute a defensible wage and often involved forced, long-term labor. These occupational roles were not merely economic activities but were embedded in a rigid social order that reinforced caste hierarchies and denied upward mobility.

By engaging with these theoretical perspectives, this research frames the occupational shifts among Dalit communities not just as economic changes, but as transformations deeply embedded in broader social structures, historical inequalities, and evolving cultural meanings. Functionalism highlights the role of changing societal needs; Marxism focuses on power dynamics and inequality; and Symbolic Interactionism explores how these shifts affect identity and daily life. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the complex realities of occupational change in marginalized communities.

Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach, combining descriptive and interpretive methods to explore the lived experiences of Dalit communities in Dahikhola-Chhati, located along the Karnali Highway. It is grounded in the Interpretive Social Science (ISS) framework, inspired by Max Weber, to understand how individuals make sense of social and historical changes in their lives. This approach enabled close engagement with the community, focusing on how the construction of the Karnali Highway has reshaped local livelihoods and identities.

Data were collected through case studies, key informant interviews, household conversations, and participant observation, with an emphasis on rich, contextual narratives over numerical data. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases: December 2019–January 2020 and April 2021, allowing for sustained engagement and deeper insight.

Sampling

Using purposive sampling, 51 Dalit households, out of 133 in the village, including 18 female-headed household, were selected based on their relevance to the study's focus. This strategy ensured that participants had direct experience with the changes under investigation (Patton, 2002).

Data collection tools and technique

Semi-structured interviews with Dalit households formed the core of the fieldwork. These were designed as open conversations to elicit participants' stories and reflections. Key informant interviews with elders, teachers, political figures, and social workers added broader context. Case studies, especially of female-headed households, provided deeper insights into specific challenges and changes. Secondary resources, including government reports, development plans, district and municipality profiles, and literature on Dalit livelihoods and road development were used to supplement field data and situate findings within the broader socio-political context.

Results and Discussion

This chapter explores the key insights from the research. It focuses on the most influential factors behind the occupational shift among Dalit households. Grounded in real-life observations and supported by relevant literature, the study reveals how the Karnali Highway has significantly transformed livelihoods in Dahikhola-Chhati—one of Nepal's most remote and marginalized areas.

The roots of this study trace back to 2008, when I began working as a Social Development 'Expert' with the Department of Roads on the World Bank-supported Road Sector Development Project (RSDP). One of the project's major components was the Karnali Highway, cutting through the steep and isolated hills of Kalikot district in Karnali Province. Although the basic earthen road opened between 2000 and 2002, it took nearly 14 years to complete the fully graveled and blacktopped highway in 2015. Stretching 233 kilometers from Surkhet to Jumla, the highway has become a crucial link connecting the region with the rest of the country.

Kalikot is home to small, close-knit villages where life has traditionally been shaped by limited access to markets. There exist low levels of development, and strong social hierarchies, especially affecting Dalit communities. These communities have long been engaged in caste-based occupations with minimal economic or social advancement. However, the construction of the highway has begun to shift this dynamic. Two major findings from Dahikhola-Chhati have been pointed:

Occupational shift

A significant number of Dalit households have transitioned from traditional caste-based work to new occupations, including roles in construction, transportation, retail trade, and small businesses. The highway has exposed people to opportunities beyond the confines of their village, enabling them to pursue work that provides income, dignity, and independence. This shift can be taken as a broader social transformation.

Diversification of income sources

Another notable change has been seen in the diversification of income. Many households now rely on multiple income sources, including non-farm wage labor, livestock rearing, and small-scale businesses. Cash-based daily wage work has become more common, reducing dependence on exploitative caste-based economic systems and offering greater control over livelihoods. These findings are similar with the findings of Luintel (2018), who argues that as livelihoods diversify, rigid caste boundaries begin to soften. With increased access to education, urban exposure, and modern market values, younger generations are embracing self-respect, dignity, and individual freedom, challenging structures like the jajmani system.

In addition to the findings above, the research has also explored some other issues which are worth to mention here.

Improved local connectivity

The highway has tremendously reduced travel time to nearby towns. It has created ease access to public services, schools, and healthcare. What once took hours or days can now be reached in minutes or hours, fostering a sense of inclusion.

Market access and infrastructure growth

Improved road has enabled the local producers and workers to have access in broader markets. They have got opportunities to sell their products, get fair prices, and have expanded employment opportunities outside the village.

Changes in the lifestyle and migration

Beyond economic effects, daily life has also been changed. Exposure to urban culture and consumer goods has grown, and youth increasingly seek employment in towns or abroad. So, the Highway has been a bridge to connect them to the advances of modern life.

Discussion

The data from the study enabled to point out significant changes in the life-aspects of rural people including the Dalits of the study area. One of the most striking findings of this study is the profound occupational shift among Dalit households in Dahikhola-Chhati village. Nearly half of the households in the village belong to Dalits, and the changes they've experienced is far beyond their imagination. They reflect a deeper transformation in identity, dignity, and future aspirations. Traditionally, Dalit families were engaged in caste-based occupations like tailoring, blacksmithing, and goldsmith skills passed down through generations under the *jajmani* system, where Dalits served upper-caste families and were paid meager wages, often in food or gifts during festivals. These jobs barely met their basic needs and offered little room for mobility or recognition. But the better road access has changed their life course. Among the 51 Dalit households included in the survey, 49 households, approximately, 87% in total have completely transitioned to new livelihoods. The change is seen from non-farm wage labor to small businesses. Only 2 households continue to manage both traditional and new occupation, mainly out of necessity rather than tradition.

The changes have also been observed in the profession and occupational status. Along with road access, Dalits are now in the profession/occupation of driving, construction, small-scale business, and even some of them are engineers. These shifts reflect not just economic change, but social empowerment. For many, this is the first time they've been able to choose their work, earn a regular cash income, and step outside the roles caste once confined them to. These statistics come to life when I came to learn about their individual experiences. Take Ramane Damai (Nepali), for example, a man who once lived within the rigid structures of the *jajmani* system in Upallo Chhati, has now been motivated to choose the profession of his interest. His father used to sew clothes year-round for upper-caste families, receiving just enough food to scrape by. Ramane tried to support his family by working in the fields or carrying loads during the off-season. But once they get access to easy road access because of Karnali Highway, Ramane found work as a construction laborer his first job that paid in cash, by the hour. Over time, he began supplying materials for construction, gradually building his skills, confidence, and resources. Today, he is a contractor, with a solid income and the respect that comes with running his own business. For Ramane, the road has been a tool for work enshrinement.

Another significant change is the positioning of Dalits in government service and in prestigious occupation/profession. Krishna Sunar, a young civil engineer shared: "I am an engineer to help my people in Karnali. I want to bring what I've learned back home and do work that matters." Krishna is the son of Jwan Singh Sunar, who once

ran a small jewelry shop. When road construction project initiated in the village, Jwan joined a major construction company as a local partner. That very event paved the way for his children's education.

The Karnali Highway has been more than just a means to connect towns; it has connected people to opportunities. It has helped break down centuries-old caste barriers, giving Dalit families the chance to dream, to earn, and to be seen differently by both their communities and themselves. This can be taken as a social transformation than just an economic change.

Similarly, the findings have entailed income diversification and its role in occupational shift. The growing diversification of income among Dalit households has been noted as a crucial impact of the Highway. It has become a key force behind their shift away from traditional caste-based occupations. This change is seen most clearly after the construction of the Karnali Highway. It can be taken as an instance of how road connectivity can breathe life into new opportunities. From the field visits and conversations with families, it is inferred that occupational shift is not simply a matter of preference it's a response to necessity, opportunity, and hope. For generations, Dalit households in Dahikhola-Chhati were confined to hereditary roles like blacksmithing, goldsmith, tailoring, and systems such as *Baili Ghare*, *Haliya*, and *Jajmani Pratha*. These roles offered little security, meager wages (often paid in kind), and left families vulnerable. But the access of Highway configured their livelihood in many different aspects. From the perspective of research, the highway has acted as a powerful catalyst. It has opened doors to employment across multiple sectors, supported skill development, and increased mobility in both physical and economic spheres. Through programs like the Vulnerable Community Development Program (VCDP), families received training, wage employment, and knowledge that helped them transition into more secure livelihoods. People who had once been confined to seasonal or subsistence work are now earning steady cash incomes being engaged as construction workers, traders, entrepreneurs, drivers, and service providers.

This transformation is vividly seen in the rise of small businesses along the road. Many Dalit households have started tea shops, grocery stores, or roadside hotels ventures that not only supported their families but created a new identity rooted in self-reliance rather than tradition. People including, Lalu Singh Sunar, Bhakte BK, and Kalam Nepali have gone even further, engaged in long-distance trade, connecting markets between towns like Surkhet, Manma, Rara, Butwal even in Kathmandu. The road has not just carried vehicles; it has carried dreams across the mountains along with organic produce.

More importantly, this wave of change includes women, many of whom are now running businesses, collecting and selling sand, or managing roadside hotels. Here is a story of Jausara Sunar, a widow from Dahikhola, who proudly shared: *“My small local hotel is growing because of the road and bridge construction along the Karnali Highway. More people are coming every day, and business is improving”* Her voice echoed what many others expressed, the implication is: ‘life is not without challenges, but there is now a sense of movement, of possibility’. With cash income, easier access to work, and lower transport costs, families can now meet their basic needs more reliably. In this regard, Jausara said, *“At least now we can eat two meals a day.”* Another area where change has been more visible is in agriculture and herbal trade. Upallo-Chhati, known for its medicinal herbs, was not in the access of the buyers due to poor transport. Now, local products from there have been sold at roadside shops, it is because of better connectivity. These transformations are not isolated; they reflect three powerful shifts that have reshaped life in Dahikhola-Chhati:

Improved internal connectivity by creating ease to link the villages to towns. The connection is not only seen in transportation but also in service sectors, and employment opportunities. The Highway has been so imperative for the:

1. **Growth in local markets and infrastructure**, creating opportunities for new types of work and trade.
2. **Changing lifestyles and aspirations along with migration**, education, and entrepreneurship instead of the heredity-based occupations.

The next key force shaping the occupational shift in Dahikhola-Chhati is the wave of social modernization. It has been brought about by expanding access to science, technology, and education. With improved infrastructure, especially road connectivity, once-isolated communities like this one are now linked to the outside world. This connection has opened doors not just to markets and services, but to ideas, opportunities, and aspirations that were once beyond reach. The Karnali Highway, more than a road, has become a bridge between tradition and modernity. It connects remote villages with bustling cities, bringing not only goods and services, but also new ways of thinking, new technologies, and new possibilities for life and livelihood. As people from other parts of Nepal pass through Dahikhola-Chhati, they bring with them influences that are reshaping local culture and mindsets.

In the words of Asmita BK, a local Dalit woman shared: “There has been a shift in traditional occupations. People now rely on different sources of livelihood. Migration for work, both within Nepal and abroad, has increased. Agricultural

practices and wage systems have changed. We are paid in cash now instead of kind. Health, education, and even our social lives are different.”

Asmita’s reflections signal just how deep these changes run. Work, wages, education, and even daily social interactions, everything is changing. Mana Sunar, another respondent, put it more simply but powerfully: “The road has brought both positive and negative changes, but for me, it’s a kind of magic that twisted my life.”

This sort of amazing modernity has transformed not only individual lives but also the very shape of the community. Rakam of Karnali can be taken an example here. Once a sleepy local market, it is now on its way to becoming a smart city, a visible sign of progress and ambition, driven by road access and rising aspirations.

The Karnali Highway hasn’t just brought people closer to schools, hospitals, and markets; it has brought hope. It has enabled mobility not just in the physical sense, but socially and economically. Dalit families, who were once confined to caste-based traditional roles, are now seizing new opportunities: starting businesses, joining the workforce, sending their children to better schools, and migrating for employment. They are no longer bound by what was handed down to them, they are choosing what they want to become.

The story of Dahikhola-Chhati is a powerful reminder that infrastructure is not just about roads and bridges—it’s about connection, dignity, and change. Through this road, a new kind of future is being built; one where Dalit households are no longer defined by their past, but by their potential.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how Dalit households in Dahikhola-Chhati are shifting their occupations and what role the Karnali Highway has played in that transformation. The findings infer that improved road connectivity has not only made the area more accessible but has also opened new avenues for livelihood and economic diversification. The enhancement of infrastructure has created employment opportunities. It has enabled families to diversify their income sources and reduce reliance on traditional caste-based occupations.

With better access to markets, services, and economic opportunities, communities have experienced amazing improvements in overall well-being; extending beyond income to include access to education, healthcare, and mobility. Both case studies and statistical data have depicted visible transformation. Accordingly, Dalit households in Dahikhola-Chhati are no longer confined by the caste roles into

which they were born. Instead, they are forging new identities as professionals, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers. The story of these households is not merely about occupational change. It is about reclaiming dignity, reshaping identity, and choosing a future over a predetermined fate.

In this context, the Karnali Highway has been seen as a pathway to transformation. As traditional caste-based occupations become increasingly irrelevant, people are not only earning more, they are redefining who they are. The shift toward diversified, cash-based employment marks a profound social transformation, signaling a movement from marginalization to active participation. By and large, the highway has helped turn a narrative of exclusion into one of possibility, resilience, and self-determination. For Dalit households in Dahikhola-Chhati, the Karnali Highway has been a game-changer. It has done more than connect places, it has connected people to opportunities, resources, and a future rich with choices.

The study shows that physical infrastructure, when developed with inclusion and equity in mind, can become a powerful catalyst for social change. It has uprooted down systemic barriers and uplifting communities that have long been marginalized. However, it is essential to recognize that roads alone do not drive transformation. It is the intersection of infrastructure, training, opportunity, and the willingness of people to adapt that fuels lasting change. Dalit households are now looking for new paths to economic potentials.

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