

Dalits in the Past and Present: Experiences of *Chamars* from Nepal Tarai

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Abstract

This paper is about the caste system, status of one of the Dalit community (Chamar) and the change taking place in such community over the period of time. Caste system is the division of people based on occupational diversity which is unique feature of Hindu society. According Hindu varna system, society is hierarchically divided as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. In this hierarchy, Dalits were kept at the bottom with duty as labourers and service providers. Belonging to Shudra varna they were discriminated in the name of so called untouchable caste. The results of untouchability were manifested in various areas of social practice including work and wage. It made Dalits to at the margin of the society. Later on the provision of punishment if any case of untouchability was found in practice was made. Even after the implementation of legal provision that considers discriminatory or untouchable practices against Dalits as illegal activities there is still the practice of untouchability. Till the date most of Dalits including Chamars in Tarai are engaged in age-old traditional occupation or manual works.

Based on the previous literatures and few narratives collected through interviews this paper argues that the status of Chamar, one of the Dalit communities of Tarai was facing various problems including untouchability in the past and even today they are experiencing problems of various kinds including untouchability. However, social and cultural movement of Dalits in eastern Tarai of Nepal is an struggle for changing status of Dalits including Chamars.

Key Words: Dalits, Hierarchy, Discrimination, Change, Nepal.

1. Context

This article is based on previous literatures written on Dalits of Nepal particularly focusing on Chamars, one of the Dalit communities of Tarai Nepal. Due to this reason the data included in this article may seem older. However, data which could be useful are updated as far as possible. According to population census of Nepal 2021 there are 142 caste/ethnicity in Nepal. Among them, there are certain caste which are categorized as Dalits. In 2011, of more than hundred and twenty ethnic and caste groups that make up the nation of Nepal, *Dalits*, comprising of approximately 14 per cent of the population (CBS, 2012). The size of Dalit population in the 2021 census remains similar. Among all caste/ethnic groups of Nepal Dalit which comprises a number of caste groups is disadvantaged and marginalized community in terms of access to resources and

opportunities. Untouchability practices are still prevalent, especially in the remote and rural areas of Nepal. Even touching food or possessions make polluted and unacceptable for others. To name only one incident, on 1 January 2012, Maya B.K., a 27 year old Dalit woman, wanted to collect water from the village well in Tanahu district, west of Kathmandu. When she accidentally touched the water container of a Newar woman, nearby members of the Newar community beat her repeatedly, resulting in severe injuries in the neck and head (Kantipur, 2 January 2012, cited from Khanal, Felphe & Pyakurel, 2012:12). This kind of sad news have been often heard in news. One of the biggest discriminatory case against Dalit took place in Rukum.

On May 23, 2020, 21-year-old Nabaraj BK, from Bheri Municipality in Jajarkot district, along with 18 of his friends, had gone to Soti in Chaurjahari Municipality of West Rukum to bring his 17-year-old girlfriend, belonging to so-called 'upper caste', as his bride when the locals attacked them and chased them towards the Bheri River (Kathmandu post, 2023, December 26). This is case reflects the alarming situation of discrimination against Dalits in Nepal.

The concept of Dalit is a new in the context of Nepal. There are various views on who are Dalits. As mentioned by Sunar, Bishokarma, Poudel, Nepali, B.K., and Manabi (2015:6) Dalits are those communities who, by virtue of atrocities of caste based discrimination and untouchability, are most backward in social, economic, educational, political and religious fields, and are deprived of human dignity and social justice (Proposed Bill, National Dalit Commission-NDC). Dalit comprise 13.2% of the total 26494504 population of Nepal (CBS, 2011). There are 26 castes under Dalit including 7 Hill Dalit castes and 19 Tarai/Madhesi Dalit castes (NDC, 2014). These caste groups are listed more specifically in the census of 2021 as well.

In practice, untouchability refers to avoidance of physical contact with persons of lower castes grounded in the caste system of Hinduism that contacts with lower caste people pollute the upper caste people. There is a growing literature on the Dalits in Nepal. Also, an empirical study by a research team of ActionAid Nepal in 2001, carried out in four Village Development Committees and Municipalities for the first time revealed comprehensively, the extent of caste based discrimination in Nepal. The need to carry out research on the same in other areas of Nepal with in-depth assessment has evolved out of the strong practice of untouchability which marks strongly the violation of human rights; indeed. Indeed it challenges all values of human dignity, democracy, equality and social justice (Bhattachan, Sunar, & Bhattachan, 2009, p. 1). Bhattachan, Sunar, and Bhattachan (2009) further write:

Dalits comprise of a diversified social groups in terms of intensity of practices of caste-based discrimination against them including untouchability and discrimination such as regional, linguistic, religious, cultural, gender and class based discrimination. Dalits comprise of two distinct regional groups: the Hill Dalits and the Madhesi Dalits. The lowest number of family names is of Batar and highest numbers are of Pariyar, Viswakarma and Sarki. Many family names of Dalits are identical with that of Bahun-Chhetris and some are identical with Vaisya and some are indigenous peoples. In some regions, districts or villages, non-Dalits do not practice caste-based untouchability against Dalits. For example, caste-based untouchability is non-existent in communities of the mountain region, where they are mostly untouched by the National legal codes and/or the process of Hinduisation and Sanskritisation. In communities affected by caste-based discrimination, including untouchability some non-Dalit communities such as Sattar/Santhal, Jhangad/Dhangad are treated as untouchables in the Terai region. (P. 4)

However, each Dalit community is not homogeneous itself. There is also social, economic and cultural diversity and inequality within and between *Dalit* groups. Nepali and Ramtel (2012, p. 10) mention that "*Dalit* themselves are not single category but also heterogeneous in terms of caste structure and status as specified in Muluku Ain 1854 on the one hand, and spatially scattered population all over the country on the other hand". Though comprehensive study is not available, scattered studies have somehow shown that there is difference on access to land resource within *Dalit* community, and it has a differential effect on their social lives. Likewise, "Critique of trickle-down theory also mentions elite capturing of resources and opportunities of development aid, and not reaching to the actual intended beneficiaries" (Parakarma, 2005). It might further disadvantage lower and marginalized sections within *Dalit* community, such as *Badi*, *Gandharva*, *Halkhor*, *Mushhar*, *Tatma*, *Dhobi*, *Bantar* etc. and more effects on women of all sections of population. This paper focuses on the status of Chamars of eastern tarai and attempts to explore the changing scenario.

2. Objectives and Methods

The primary objective of this paper is to explore the past and present status of Dalits in general and Chamars in particular and change taking place. While doing so this paper examines the status of Dalit in relation to Non-Dalit community. Major focus is, however, on examining the current status of Chamars in terms of their past and present relationship.

This paper is prepared is based on the information collected during consultations and review of different research findings on the Dalits, non-Dalits and their relationship. The findings of these consultations have been interpreted with the support of some empirical observations made during the field visit of a Dalit community; *Chamars*, in eastern Tarai.

3. Status of Dalits in Nepal: Past and Present

There are several studies (Bhattachan., Sunar, Bhattachan, 2009; Cameron, 2005; Goyal, 2005) on *Dalits* of Nepal. Among them, Bhattachan, Sunar, and Bhattachan (2009:22) mention that the division of labour is discriminatory against *Dalit* women. Cameron (2005, p. 93) writes, "Both "high" and "low" caste/*Dalit* women work in family farms and are engaged with domestic works as well, so they spend more time than their male counterparts". Also, Cameron, 2005, p. 100) further mentions that "*Dalit* women spend more time as compared to their 'high' caste women counterparts". Cameron's study (2005) reveals that 'low' caste people or *Dalits* do most of the agricultural works. *Dalit* women are mostly involved in weeding and digging the fields, carrying manures (fertilizers), and transplanting seedlings (Cameron, 2005, p. 100). Where as *Dalit* men mostly do ploughing and sowing fields, and digging canals. About one thirds of respondents belonging to 'high' caste perform works such as digging canals, transplanting seedlings and carrying fertilizers (Cameron, 2005). This kind of gender based differences in wage can be found among all caste/ethnic groups. However, at present this kind of gap in wage between male and female is gradually decreasing. In many parts of Nepal wage for similar work is almost similar.

Bhattachan, Sunar, and Bhattachan (2009, p. 23) emphasizes on discrimination against *Dalit* and clearly mention that bonded Labour: Caste-based untouchability and division of labour, illiteracy, landlessness, semi-feudal system etc. are responsible for perpetuation of discriminatory labour practices such as *Bista*, *Balighare*, *Haliya* etc. In *Bista* and *Balighre* practices, each *Dalit* household has a non-*Dalit* patron and provide their labour throughout the year and get rewards in kind once in a year during harvest.

A report prepared by the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice states, "Such discrimination is intentionally designed to keep alive a system of debt bondage and free farmlands for cultivation of "upper caste" lands (Goyal, 2005, p. 11). According to Robertson and Mishra (1997, p. vi), "Although there has been no survey of the number of people affected by debt bondage, it is estimated that they run into hundreds of thousands: men and women who have mortgaged their working life in lieu of interest on a loan they will never be able to repay. It is ironic that in many cases the original debt may amount to no more than the average family in the industrialized world would spend on a restaurant meal." In modern age, this kind of scenario may give a surprising picture. However, these traditional caste based practices are gradually changing and declining.

Robertson and Mishra (1997, p. 1) state, "The powerful custom demands that only untouchable castes or low status ethnic groups plough the land as *Haliya*." However, this

practice no longer exists today. Similarly, other changes are also taking place in the status of *Dalits* as well.

Status of *Dalits* is not only found poor in social, economic and cultural aspects. There is very low level of access in politics as well. Khanal, Felphe and Pyakurel (2012, p. 77) mention about the changes in the status of *Dalits*. They write that institutional measures and procedures intended to ensure the proportional participation and representation of *Dalits* in all state organs are further stressed explicitly as “the right to social justice” in the fundamental rights section of the constitution, making it obligatory for the state to enforce (Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007, Art. 21). This also an important structural change that brings *Dalits* into maintain politics and development.

The constitutional provisions made in favour of *Dalits* further implicates more than altering the electoral system, and has to be addressed and resolved in the configuration and design of decision making bodies. Moreover, it is essential in compensating for past injustices that continue to be observed in the human development of the country. On human development indicators across economic, educational and health dimensions, *Dalits* score far below the national average. Some figures of access to opportunities and resources among *Dalits* can be mentioned based on Sunar, Bishokarma, Poudel, Nepali, B.K., and Manabi (2015, p. 12). The literacy rate of *Dalits* (6 years and above) is 52.4 percent compared to the national average of 65.9 percent and it is 34.5 percent for Tarai/Madhese *Dalit*. Only, 24.7 percent of Hill *Dalits* and 11.8 percent of Tarai/Madhese *Dalits* complete 8th grade which is far behind the national average (41.7%). *Dalits* comprise only 1.6 percent of those with a SLC and above; and only 0.8 percent of those with a Bachelors’ degree. Similarly, the literacy rate of *Dalit* women is 45.5 percent. Women from *Musahar* and *Dom* community are at the bottom with literacy rates of 17.4 percent and 17.9 percent (Sunar, Bishokarma, Poudel, Nepali, B.K., and Manabi, 2015, p. 12). However, the overall status of *Dalits* is also gradually shifting towards positive direction.

Steven (2007) mentions about caste and equality in Nepal. As mentioned in the writing of Steven (2007, p. 45) eliminating social and political barriers to low castes (and others, such as women, *janajati*, etc.), is one of the salient issues of the day. In today’s activist social climate attaining equality is frequently discussed. Nepal has been highly politicized for as long as Steven has worked there, beginning in 1979. Even then, in urbanizing Pokhara, *Dalits* of *Damai* Tol voiced an intense dissatisfaction with their low standing at the time of the Referendum of 1980 on the multiparty status of the government.

In an interview Steven had with a *Damai* man (*Dalit* male of *Damai* caste) in his 30s particularly stands out. Although Steven's project only dealt peripherally with inter-caste relations, it was prominent in his mind. His comments centered on the injustice in the many restrictions heaped upon low caste people. He peppered his remarks with reference to the equality (*barabar*) he felt was inherent in all people, essentialized by the sharing of one blood. “*Mero ragat chha. Bahunko ragat pani chha. Mero haat khatera ragat auncha. Bahunko haat khatera, ragat pani auncha.*” (I have blood. A Brahmin also has blood.

When my arm is cut, I bleed. When a Brahmin's arm is cut, he also bleeds). In the nearly three intervening decades, the Dalit cause has been taken up on official and informal fronts. The Government of Nepal includes the improvement of *Dalit* social, economic, educational and political status in its Tenth Five-Year Plan, in which social justice for *Dalits* is officially designated as a goal deserving of an entire chapter (as mentioned in Steven, 2007, p. 45):

All around development is possible only if multi-ethnic groups, multi-lingual and various groups and communities within the country develop in proportionate manner. Such type of development will help to utilize their inherent skill, ability and knowledge in the national development process on the one hand, and on the other, assist to uplift the living standard of the Dalits, neglected, downtrodden and oppressed classes by creating employment opportunities through the mobilization of local resources (Government of Nepal 2002, 28, p. 1).

Mishra (n.d.) discusses on inter-group relations and writes social Caste is one of the most important social institutions in the Nepal Tarai even today. Caste behaviours are deeply embedded in peoples' values, reflecting hierarchy, endogamy, commensality and the other forms of the day to day interaction of people. Contacts of any kind touching, dining, sex and other social relations between castes of equal status are permissible or do not result in pollution. Mutual acceptability of cooked food, particularly rice and lentils denotes equal social status between caste groups. A member of the village community will marry only with the member of his own caste.

However, in the study two cases of inter caste marriage i.e. marriage between Tarai and hill caste group were reported in that VDC then. These married couples were not accepted by the community even before a decade. This kind of cases can be found even today. In other words, marriages across caste boundaries are regarded as deviations from an ideal norm of caste behavior (Mishra, n.d., p. 125). This type of change is taking place in social and religious activities as well.

Mishra (n.d.) further writes, though there is an overlap of social and religion activities, there are distinct caste services which are indispensable in certain religious and ritual occasions of the village life. Such groups who provide their religious services are the barbers, *Brahmins*, goldsmith (sonar) and *Chamars*. The barbers' services are necessary in most of the ritual occasions of middle caste, lower caste and the high caste Hindu groups. A barber acts as a ritual purifier during birth, marriage and death. Shaving is required for a man in many ritual occasions such as '*Upanayan*' ceremony, death of any member of a family, during the ancestor worship and at the time when a person takes part in a ceremony. But these days there is no more such practices.

Together with changes in traditional caste based practices there is also continuity in some practices in both Dalits and non-Dalits community. During delivery, a woman is ritually purified on the 6th day when her nails of hands and feet are cut and also after the death of any member of a family her nails are cut down on the 10th day of the death by a *Hajam* woman. A Maithil Brahmin is respected in the ritual context even if he may be very poor.

In every ritual such as birth, marriage, *Upanayan*, construction of a new house, worship of any god, new vehicle and death, all castes, except the lowest caste group of the Tarai invite the Brahmin. The goldsmiths (sonar) are invited to ritually pierce the ears of young boys and girls of high caste Hindus. Similarly, the *Chamars* play with their drums in many rituals occasions such as the *Mundan* (hair cutting ritual) *Upanayan*, worshipping of the village deity (Mishra, n.d., p. 132). This type of inter-group or inter-caste relation continues even today. However, there are gradual changes in the procedures of performing these rituals due to the effects of modernization.

Subedi (2014) elaborately writes, in the past, a number of activities in the village, especially those requiring particular skills or knowledge, were performed by the specific caste groups in Udipur. Most of these occupations were thought of as caste specific, and the arrangement for work and payment were standardized in some form of traditional exchange, the *jajmani* system. As mentioned by Berreman (1972) and Cameron (1998) such system was very common in India and Nepal. The economic base of the village was based on ownership of land and certain social relationships were established among various castes. The *Brahmins* and *Magars* were primarily agriculturalists. Very few *Brahmins* were engaged in priestly work. An artisan or service caste members were responsible to provide services. They were paid a fixed portion of grain at each harvest. The amount depended upon the size of the household or landholding of the agriculturalist and the type of the service performed. Ideally the relationship was permanent one with standard traditional payments, but in practice a good deal of shifting was always possible where there were more than one local artisan available. The traditional economic exchange was not only between high caste and artisans but also among the artisans. Blacksmiths, for example, had to get service from the tailors and vice versa.

In the past, Subedi (2014) writes that *Jajmani* system was very common in Udipur. The common term used for such system is *balighare*. The term bali literally means cereal crop. It also refers to annual wages paid in kind by farming households to people to employ (*Dalit* or other castes depending on the nature of service needed and the speciality of the service providing caste in question) during an agricultural year to perform various kinds of tasks including plowing, making and repairing farming equipments, sewing and mending of clothes/garments etc. (Subedi, 2014, pp. 90-91).

Here it would be good to quote what Subedi (2014) notes about the changing inter-caste relations in the context of Nepal. Subedi (2014) writes:

In the past, caste had a significant role in shaping occupations and roles as well as values of various activities in Udipur. Hereditary occupation was an expected role of the household members. The situation has changed. Relationships between castes (inter-caste relations) have become more relaxed today. There is more food sharing between castes and a lot more eating done at local restaurants where caste distinctions are less likely to be made. One of the biggest changes that took place in Udipur is occupational pursuits of various castes. Many have now taken up newer occupations that do not relate to their caste, such as government jobs,

teaching, retail and services, and repair work. Wealth and power in the village is now less associated with caste than before. (Pp. 93)

Thus the caste based practices in the rural villages of Nepal is entirely shifting from feudal to capitalist mode because Nepalese society is also a part of capitalist world economy. As noted by Subedi (2014, p. 95), “today Nepal is undergoing a deep structural shift: away from predetermined and largely unchanging caste/ethnic identity as the primary basis for social status and economic and political power, towards a more open, class-structured society where status is based on attributes like education, wealth and political influence which (at least theoretically) can be attained through individual effort”. Thus the traditional caste based inter-caste relations prevailed in the villages of Nepal is shifted towards modern rational and capitalist form of relations.

Since the last 20-25 years different awareness programmes have been conducted through various government and non-government organizations. For instance, the awareness programme initiated by the Saraswati Community Development Forum through the Regenerated Freirian Literacy by Empowering Community Technique (REFLECT) Circles converted into a mass movement by creating influx of the people of Saptari and Siraha and Singh Durbar (*Government of Nepal Secretariats*) ultimately. Success made in this regard has been taken as a big achievement by the Dalits of the Tarai. There are also movements in the villages which have brought a number of changes.

According to *Chamars* movement was not their desire, but consequence of social and economic exploitation for a long time. To initiate any movement, people should be organized and made conscious about their legal and constitutional rights. The ultimate goal of any movement is to “Get rid of all kinds of undesired exploitation”. The *Dalits* have a very clear vision about the movement. According to them, “the movement is a process which should be conducted and organized continuously using peaceful means and participatory approach.” Women also participated actively and enthusiastically in this process. Children also participated in protest and processions. The Saraswati Community Development Forum, Action Aid Nepal, Biratnagar and social activists also played important role for the movement. Participation of some non-*Dalits*, social organizations, political parties, human activists, media are also very appreciating.

The *Chamars* have understood empowerment as a process of enhancing capacity and strength to utilize their rights. They have been provided training and education to increase their skill and strength during the period of the movement. Both men and women have participated actively in the process. During the training and education programme, they have been oriented to organize and conduct the movement according to the action plan. Similarly, they have been provided with the skills and knowledge to review the progress along with activating community people and their strength. Because of orientation and training, the levels of awareness about their rights have been found raised to a considerable degree.

More importantly, such movements carried out by the Dalit community and the activities carried out by various government and non-government organizations brought various

socio-cultural changes in *Dalit* community. Untouchability is gradually diminishing nowadays. A new kind of social bond have been developed and established between *Dalits* and non-*Dalits*. They have also started respecting each other.

In the past women were misbehaved and suppressed by men. Nowadays, they are treated well and they also given importance in family matters and public life. Women are participating in solving problems of non-*Dalits*, too. A good understanding has been developed among and between children of *Dalits* and non-*Dalits*.

4. Conclusions

Status of Dalits, particularly of Chamars of Tarai is gradually changing over the period of time. We can observe changes in various indicators of status of Dalits such as education, occupation, income, cultural practices and so on. Various organizations have played prominent role to build structure and development of the people organization. *Dalit Janachetana, Nari Sangam, Dalit Samaj Sewa Sangh, Jaati Utpidan Samyaukta Sangharsha Samiti, Saraswoti Community Development Forum (SCDF)* and social activists belong to these structures and playing role to change it.

The *Chamars* are called upon by the Village Councils (VCs) in various local level meetings and programs. Local authorities are providing, with financial supports to the children of the *Chamar* communities for their education. It has been realized that special programmes are necessitated for their upliftment. Lahan Municipality is taking initiative to provide the services of throwing carcass within municipality areas at its own cost. The VCs are paying attention to the *Chamar* including all Dalits's issue. It has been accepted by the non-Dalit community as well. Non-Dalits have accepted that the *Chamars* are free to resume or abandon their traditional occupation. It has also been realized that occupation of 'Sudeni' (mid-wife) should be recognized and promoted along with its advancement.

The change of status among the *Chamars* is closely related to the changes in various spheres of their life: social, economic, political and ritual. The change of status is the result of multiple factors, among which education is the most important. It has directly contributed to the change in following areas of status along with other factors. The changes have taken place in different areas of achieved status, namely occupation, housing, and participation in village economy and finally in different areas of ascribed status. Furthermore, changes in education by initiating changes in the occupation, income and aspiration have prompted the *Chamars* to sanskritise their values and norms with the objectives of securing changes in different areas of their ascribed status, viz. entry into temple, use of the services of the Brahman priests and Sanskritic literatures. Thus status of Dalits, particularly of Chamars of Tarai is gradually changing over the period of time or different from past to present.

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