

# DALIT STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN NEPALESE SCHOOLS



Bhawan Singh Chalaune \*<sup>1</sup>✉

\*<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Education, Kailali Multiple Campus, Dhangadhi, Kailali, Dhangadhi Sub-metropolitan, Kailali, Nepal



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v8.i8.2020.977>

**Article Type:** Research Article

**Article Citation:** Bhawan Singh Chalaune. (2020). DALIT STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN NEPALESE SCHOOLS. International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH, 8(8), 147-154.  
<https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v8.i8.2020.977>

**Received Date:** 03 August 2020

**Accepted Date:** 27 August 2020

**Keywords:**

Caste-Based Discrimination  
Dalits  
Education System  
Restructuring

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore the practice of caste-based discrimination in the education by analyzing the perception and experiences of the Dalit students within schools and society. This analysis is based on the data obtained from literature and documents, questionnaire with focus group discussion, conversation and observation conducted on purposively selected schools in Kailali and Achham Districts of Far Western region, Nepal. Dalit students are the main informants of this study. In this regard, total 235 students were selected through a probability sampling method. The practice of caste-based discrimination still exists in society and schools as well. However, it is constitutionally illegal and its effect was seen in school. And yet Dalit students have felt some kind of discrimination in the education system. Due to this discrimination, Dalit students have faced psychological effects with their school participation and performance. Dalit students also think that schools cannot fulfill their expectations due to school actions as reproducing social norms and norms. The issue of education that excludes Dalits is still challenged. Most importantly, changing root of social practices and structural problems is not a task to be completed by anyone's single effort. However, this article suggests that a restructuring of the education system is needed. Similarly, a sustained effort to transform the attitudes of discrimination into the values of humanity and to adjust these values into practices is essential.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2011 census shows that the Dalit population comprises about 13.6 percent of Nepal's total 26.5 million populations (CBS, 2012). The complex hierarchy of Nepali society has generated an oppressive social structure that treats the lowest classes of the population as sub-human. Dalits are the only group that is treated most inhumanely by so-called 'upper castes' through caste-based discrimination, including untouchability.

The status of Dalits as untouchables in the caste structure is the most important factor that historically led to their exclusion from education in traditional Hindu society. Public education in Nepal, which started mostly after Nepal's political change, brought about massive changes in educational participation. Before 1951, there were some educational institutions and the massive section of the society consisting of Dalits did not have access to formal education. In fact, the Dalit community was generally barred from participating in education. After 1951, both the numbers of schools and schools enrollment increased rapidly. There was no formal prohibition for Dalits to participate in education, but due to the hierarchical caste system and caste-based oppression, Dalits hardly

participated. At the time of active monarchical rule (party-less Panchayat system) before 1990, the rate of literacy and school enrollment of Dalits was much lower than the rest.

After the restoration of democracy in 1990, education expanded significantly. The government started providing free primary level education to all children. The government started special programs to increase school enrollment by distributing oil and wheat flour to families who sent their children to schools. Constitutional provisions, along with policy emphasis in education, parents' aspirations for the education of their children brought an increasing proportion of Dalit children into schools. However, the educational status of Dalits shows lower rate of literacy and enrollment, higher rate of dropout in the early years from the school, higher rate of repetition and failure than other castes people (UNESCO, 2013). In addition, a large number of school going children from Dalit community are out of school. The high dropout rate of Dalit students/ children in early years of schooling indicates that among school enrolled Dalit children; the majority dropout school within the first three years of their schooling (Poudel, 2007). Only 20% of Dalit students are enrolled in primary education and 6% in secondary education (UNESCO, 2013). Similarly, national enrollment in higher education is 17.6%, but average rate of dropout of Dalits is 3.8%. Dropout rate is especially high in the first grade. The completion rate is equally low in primary schools, especially for Dalit girls (IIDS, 2009). This clearly indicates that there is social discrimination in the society. Discriminatory behavior certainly does not support for a healthy school environment in formal education.

## 2. PURPOSE OF THE ARTICLE

The purpose of this article is to explore the practice of caste-based discrimination in the education in Nepal by analyzing the perception and experiences of the Dalit students within schools and society.

## 3. METHODS AND TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect data. I used a specific method with a specific group. The method, its strengths and the data it intended to elicit and its practical use were considered. Questionnaires and focus groups were used in Dalit students to get the data. To collect authentic information, a set of questionnaires for Dalit students, a set of interview schedules with checklists, have been used. Similarly, fourteen focus group discussions were also held in both the districts. Formal and informal meetings and participatory observations were also made during field trips for data collection. In addition, secondary data are also important sources for the study. The samples were drawn from fifteen selected public secondary (grades 6 to 12) from Achham and Kailali districts. For this process, the main groups of participants for questionnaire and focus group discussion (FGD) study were from schools. After selecting districts, 8 schools out of 125 public schools were selected from Kailali district and 7 schools out of 94 public schools were selected from Achham district purposively. From the selected schools, students studying from 6 to 12 were selected disproportionately dividing them in terms of the stratum of the district, sex, and level/class. While selecting the sample through a stratified sampling method, priority was given to the mature students from the higher level that was from different sub-group populations with sub-caste groups. As this study is qualitative in nature, it was considered that information would support this condition. After that 106 students out of 1038 (girls 480 and boys 558) were selected from Achham district and 129 students out of 1309 (girls 736 and boys 573) were selected from Kailali district. Thus, total 235 students out of 2347 (girls 1216 and boys 1131) were selected through a probability sampling method.

**Table 1:** Distribution of students surveyed by sex, according to district of survey

District	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	N	N	%
Achham	57	53.8	49	46.2	106	45.1
Kailali	58	45	71	55	129	54.9
Total	115	48.9	120	51.1	235	100

Source: Field Study (2015)

**Table 2:** Distribution of students surveyed by selected characteristics

	N	%		N	%
Age group			Levels of Education		
12-14	45	19.1	Lower Secondary- 6-8	71	30.2
15-17	129	54.9	Secondary- 9-10	116	49.4
18+	61	26	Higher Secondary- 11-12	48	20.4
Total	235	100.0	Total	235	100.0

Source: Field study (2015)

Overall, 235 students completed the questionnaire (with response rates 100%). In some schools, pupils encouraged each other to complete the questionnaire in classroom settings, in other school there was less discussion of the questionnaire. Questionnaire that contain students' experiences were completed by 115 male (49.9%), 120 female (51.1%). Participants' mean age was 16.31 years, and standard deviation was 2.16. The youngest was 12 years old; the oldest was 24 years old. During the data collection, discussions were also held with the parents of the students and other persons related to education.

#### 4. DALIT STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF CBD IN SCHOOL

Dalit community is facing caste-based discrimination in educational institutions. Dalit students face direct and/or indirect discrimination by teachers and peers. Dalit students face discrimination in the community.

**Table 3:** Experiences of Dalit students about CBD and Untouchability

Items	Responses	N (235)	%
Untouchability at school	Yes	17	7.2
	No	87	37
	Somewhat	131	55.7
Untouchability in Village	Too much	151	64.3
	Is not	1	0.4
	Somewhat	83	35.3
Untouchability within Dalits?	Yes	182	77.4
	No	32	11.6
	Somewhat	21	8.9
Are non-Dalit teachers and students behaving the same at school and home?	Yes	6	2.6
	No	229	97.4
Field of CBD in school by teachers (Upper caste)	Teaching	16	6.8
	Evaluation	35	14.9
	Punishment	25	10.64
	Responsibility	125	53.2
	Missing	34	14.5
Experiences of CBD at school or out of school	Yes, with me	74	31.5
	Yes, with friends	47	20.1
	No	73	31.0
	Missing	41	17.44
CBD affects on your education than economic	Yes	174	74
	No	61	26
Affects CBD your desire of getting education	Yes	133	56.8
	No	101	43.2
	Missing	1	0

Source: Field Survey (2015)

## Dalit Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Caste-Based Discrimination in Nepalese Schools

The field data indicates that the practice of untouchability in school is decreasing. Thirty seven percent respondents have responded that there is no untouchability in schools and only 7.2 percent respondents have said that untouchability still prevails in schools. Nearly fifty six percent (55.7%) respondents have said that untouchability has been decreasing in relation to the past. Similarly, 51.5 percent students have responded the happening of direct and indirect caste discrimination with them.

Although direct untouchability has been decreasing inside schools, it is still prevalent outside the schools. More than sixty-four (64.3) percent of participants have responded that untouchability still highly prevails in the societies outside the schools. More than thirty-five (35.3) percent have accepted that it is lowering in comparison to the past. Similarly, more than ninety-seven (97.4) percent of Dalit students responded that so-called upper caste teachers behave differently in schools and home. More than eighty-six (86.4) percent of Dalit students responded that caste discrimination exists even within Dalit communities. Most of the respondents said that untouchability is more common in food, water, worship, and temples.

Hikmat, a Dalit student, has expressed his experiences like this: When I went to the city after passing School Leaving Certificate (SLC), I could not find room when I mentioned my surname. Once I did not mention my surname, I found a room. But later when the owner of the house came to know that I belonged to the Dalit community, I was forced to leave my room within two days.

(Conversation, Kalilali, f/n, 2015)

Some Dalit students said 'non- Dalit teachers have less untouchable behavior directly inside the schools but at home they do not eat foods and drink water touched by us. They also don't allow us to enter their houses and worship.'

It seems that Dalit students have realized discrimination in the cases of teaching-learning, evaluation, punishment and providing any responsibility. More than fifty-three (53.2) percent of Dalit students have responded that Dalits have been discriminated in extra-curricular activities, selection of monitor, teacher appointment and selection of the leader of school management committees. Comparatively, Dalit students have less participation in schools. It seems that they have deep psychological effect about caste discrimination. Although Dalit students are offered education free of cost and provided scholarship, their active participation is still low in schools. Dropout rate is also high in them. Why? Seventy-four percent of Dalit students have taken the CBD as the main cause of it. Only 26 percent Dalit students have taken economic and other factors as the cause of it. Nearly fifty-seven (56.8) percent Dalit students have responded that CBD has negative impact on their expectation and inspiration of getting education, while 43.2 percent have told that caste discrimination has no impact on getting education for them.

Some other Dalits student said, we don't have any experience of discrimination done by higher caste teachers and peers in school. Caste discrimination is found in society/village /home/temple a lot. (FGD, Achham and Kailali, f/n, 2014/15)

It was perceived that discrimination was a bad cultural practice that excluded Dalits from social life. The student is a member of the society and the cultural practices of the society are associated with persons. It states that no discriminatory behavior has been found in teacher and peer behavior. This challenged the cultural reproduction theory that the school is highly involved in the creation of new and mixed culture rather than reproduction.

**Table 4:** Experiences of Dalit students about pedagogical activities at school

Items	Responses	N (235)	%
Do non-Dalit teachers discriminate among Dalits and non-Dalit students?	Yes	24	10.2
	No	88	37.5
	somewhat	123	52.3
Is there Dalit friendly teaching activities at school?	Yes	63	26.8
	No	172	73.3
Do you understand what teachers teach in class?	Yes	62	26.3
	No	75	32.0
	Somewhat	28	41.7
Is there interaction among teacher and students in the classroom?	Yes	51	21.7
	No	50	21.3

	Somewhat	103	43.8
	Missing	31	13.2
Do you ask questions if you don't understand?	Yes	51	21.7
	No	50	21.3
	Rarely	105	44.7
	Missing	29	12.3
If you don't ask questions to teachers, why?	Fear of abuse	42	17.9
	Boring teaching	58	24.7
	Not satisfactory answer	114	48.5
	Missing	21	8.9

Field survey clarifies that there is caste-based discrimination towards Dalit children in the society. Nearly sixty-three (62.5) percent Dalit students said that teachers behave Dalit and non-Dalit students differently in one way or the other. Majority of Dalit students realized that most of non-Dalit teachers care higher caste students more. Similarly, 73.3 percent responded that there are not Dalits friendly teaching activities at schools.

Thirty two percent Dalit students said that they do not understand what teachers teach and 41.7 percent said that they understand a little bit only. Teachers do not make the subject matter clear. Nearly 75 percent Dalit students have responded that there is no interaction in the classrooms. It was found that only 21.7 percent children ask questions if they do not understand lessons. It seemed that nearly 66 percent Dalit students do not ask questions if they do not understand the teachers' teaching. Dalit students said that teachers do not provide opportunities to ask questions. They said that the main cause of not asking questions is the fear of teachers' mocking, not getting satisfactory answer and what to ask if they do not understand. Nearly 18 percent Dalit students responded that they don't ask questions due to the fear of scolding by the teachers. Nearly forty-nine (48.5) percent students responded that they don't ask questions due to not getting satisfactory answers. Similarly, 25 percent Dalit students do not ask questions because they do not understand what is taught.

One Dalit student reported that once a teacher asked him, "What will you do studying?" Some students said that teachers scold them by dominating them in terms of caste.

**Table 5:** Perceptions of Dalit students on the present education system

Items	Responses	N (235)	%
How do you find your future among the present CBD of the social structure?	Bright	31	13.2
	Hopeless	56	23.8
	Partially bright	148	63.0
Will the present education system provide any support for Dalit to survive with respect?	Yes	37	15.7
	No	50	21.3
	Somewhat	148	63.0
How have you got the school environment towards Dalits as a student?	Suitable	44	18.7
	Not suitable	29	12.3
	Improving	162	68.9
Can Dalits choose prestigious occupation freely even if they get education?	Yes	57	24.3
	No	178	75.7
What do you to be in the future after getting education?	Social worker	55	32.4
	Government job	87	37.0
	Business	4	1.7
	Don't know	89	37.9

Source: Field Survey (2015)

Expected educational objectives cannot be achieved only by participating in schools. Positive thinking towards education is essential for achieving expected goals. When any community and students see their future bright through education system, there will be a time for participation in learning. But Dalit children are not so much positive towards the present education system. Nearly twenty-four (23.8) percent Dalit students have responded that their future is not fruitful due to the present education system based on caste-based social discrimination

structure. Thirty-one percent have realized their future bright while 63 percent Dalit students have realized that their future is only partially bright. More than twenty-one (21.3) percent pupils have responded that if the present situation continues, it will not help Dalits to live respectfully. Nearly sixteen (15.7) percent have realized that the present education will help Dalits to live respectfully while 63 percent have responded that it will help to some extent only. Nearly nineteen (18.7) percent Dalit students have realized that school environment is suitable for them. But 12.3 percent pupils have responded that school environment is not suitable for them, while 68.9 percent pupils have realized that the situation has been improving compared to the past.

Though field survey shows that 75.7 percent of Dalit students get education, the Dalit are not getting chances to select their profession according to their interest as they responded. Nearly 38 percent are seen to be unknown what to do after getting education. However 32.4 percent of students showed their interest in social work and 37 percent in government jobs.

**Table 6:** Response of Dalit students about the need of Dalit teacher and leadership in school

items	Responses	N (235)	%
Can you be benefited if there are Dalit teachers at school?	Yes	210	89.4
	No	25	10.6
What can be the causes for Dalits to be backward in education?	Lack of Dalit teacher and leader	52	22.0
	Lack of traditional occupations linkage	58	
	education	60	24.7
	Poverty	64	25.5
	Discrimination		27.5

Dalit pupils have responded that Dalits could not inspire to get education due to the lack of Dalit teachers and Dalit leadership in school management committees. 89.4 percent Dalit students have responded that they would be inspired towards learning if there were Dalit teachers in schools, while just 10.6 percent have responded that there wouldn't be any difference. Out of total Dalit respondents 22 percent have responded that Dalits could not be inspired towards education and were backwards due to the lack of Dalit teachers and Dalit leadership. 24.7 percent have responded that the traditional occupations of the Dalits were not made the part of curriculum, 25.5 percent said poverty and 27.5 percent said CBD.

As the findings above show, Dalits have experienced many caste discrimination and discrimination pressures in society and school. But they consider education as essential for themselves. They think that lack of education is one of the main reasons for discrimination and poverty. However, most of the Dalit students have taken CBD as their main reason. Dalit students felt that untouchability is decreasing inside the school but it is still prevalent outside the schools. Similarly, Dalit students responded that upper-caste teachers behave differently in schools and homes. However, it has been found that the traditional form of direct discrimination in school has changed to some new forms of indirect discrimination, which is more psychological than physical. Instead of encouraging Dalit students and understanding their needs, negative labeling from teachers usually discourages Dalit students.

Therefore, caste hierarchy has long been one of the most prominent reasons for Dalit deprivation for schooling. Repeatedly blaming and blaming Dalit students and indifferent attitude towards them discouraged their studies. This can result in irregular attendance in class, low concentration in studies, low participation in school activities, no interest in creativity, underperformance, and failure and school dropout. These factors result in the exclusion of Dalits from education. In this situation, according to Bourdieu, the school is not a direct mirror image of social power, but it works indirectly as a symbolic institution to reproduce existing unequal power relations. One of the major functions of the school is the reproduction of social and cultural inequalities from one generation to another (Harker, 1990).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Using questionnaire, conversations and focus group discussion combined with document review, this study shows that caste system is a prominent problem in Nepali society. The foundation of caste system is class, caste, hegemony and inequality. The hierarchical inequality of the caste system has led to inequality in social status, economy, political and education. This study found that Dalits are economically/politically exploited, socially

oppressed, and educationally disadvantaged. The practice of caste-based discrimination and untouchability still exists in society and schools.

School is an agent of society and it legitimates values, norms and culture of upper caste people of society and reproduces to next generation and Dalits are ignored (Bourdieu, 1990). Different caste group of students in school sit, eat, play, drink together despite cultural difference. From this socialization, new culture, idea, norms are developed which Bourdieu (1990) calls production function of school.

The school is an agent of the society and it legitimizes the values, norms and culture of the upper caste people of the society and reproduces for the next generation and the Dalits are ignored (Bourdieu, 1990). Different caste groups of students in school sit, eat, play and drink together despite cultural differences. From this socialization, new culture, ideas and norms are developed which is what Bourdieu (1990) calls the production work of the school.

The impact of caste-based discrimination in the society is in school. Basically discrimination is related to the behavior of upper-caste teachers and peers. Discriminatory behavior of teachers is found mainly in the context of apathetic attitude and to some extent labeling. Peers had a lot to do in terms of eating/drinking, domination, superiority and negating irrational attitudes. Discriminatory behavior creates an impact on Dalit students. Such effects can be seen in terms of absence, inferiority complex and concentration in studies, underperformance, failure and drop outs. This is similar to constructive thought in that there are realities and reasons behind these effects and discriminatory behavior is not a single cause like positive thoughts. To conclude that discriminatory behavior produces an effect and reduces the performance of Dalit students and sometimes leaves school. It has also concluded that discriminatory behavior is not just a hindrance factor and that there are many realities behind backwardness, underperformance and the dropouts of Dalits.

Therefore, more meaningful and targeted interventions need to be taken to address issues of various forms of social inequalities for mainstreaming Dalit meaningful inclusion in education. Similarly, firstly, a change in the caste-based discriminatory structure of the society is needed. For this, there is a need to change some religious order and link it with human values and dignity. Policies and practices are needed to reduce caste-based discrimination, address poverty, change social and school practices, change curriculum, and work together. Furthermore, Dalit issue and discrimination in education is not just related to technical and official challenges, but also to the conceptual phenomenon and social value system; equity is the first step but equality is important in all aspects. This requires a holistic approach and collaborative based policies and programs in addressing inclusion issues. Similarly, effective implementation of policies is needed for Dalit inclusion in education. It should also be a justice-based value commitment for policy makers and implementers.

## **SOURCES OF FUNDING**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author have declared that no competing interests exist.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

None.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1] Bourdieu, P. & Passerson, J.C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society* (R. Nice, Trans.). <https://monoskop.org/images/8/82>
- [2] Centre Bureau of Statistics (2012). *National population and housing census 2011* (National Report). Kathmandu: CBS.
- [3] Harker, R. (1990). *Bibliography*. In C. W. R. Harker (Ed.). *An introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu: The practice of theory* (pp. 226-237).

<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780333524756>

- [4] Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (2008). Caste- based Discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Nepal. Delhi: IIDS.
- [5] Poudel, L. N. (2007). Power, Knowledge and Pedagogy: An Analysis of the Education Exclusion of Dalits Nepal (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Ken cantebury. <http://create.canterbury.ac.uk/12118/1>
- [6] UNESCO (2013). Country programming document for Nepal, 2011-2013. Author.