



Local Governance Education and Dalits: A Discussion

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Abstract

Nepal retains its centuries-old caste system. Dalits suffer from the caste system for generations. Dalits are those communities who have been oppressed and marginalized in the worst forms for millenniums in the name of caste, the major practice of social stratification in the Hindu society in South Asia. They are termed as 'untouchables' by the radical enforcers of the extremely rigid caste system. There are twenty-three social sub-caste groups within Dalit communities; there are five sub-caste groups from the hills and mountains, fifteen from the plains and three from the Kathmandu valleyⁱ. Dalit communities are ecologically divided in Nepal and a practice of untouchability and caste discrimination has been expanded to all spheres of society despite the several political changes in the country.

Keywords: Dalits, Local governance, power, politics.

I. Introduction

Caste system has been entrenched in India, Nepal, Pakistan and other parts of South Asia. Gupta (2002) mentions that social stratification prevails in society. It is the ordering of social differences with the help of a set of criteria which ties the differentiated strata into a systemⁱⁱ. The combination of roles and positions are stratified in the society in line with the strata prevailing. It is accompanied by endogamy, hereditary membership and traditional occupations in a hierarchical order. Berreman (1967) defined the caste system as a 'system of birth ascribed stratification, of socio-cultural pluralism, and of hierarchical interaction'. The caste system brings the stratification to the society which is created by the birthⁱⁱⁱ. It is sharply defined and in which the boundaries between the different layers of hierarchy are rigidly fixed (p. 9).

Ghurye (1964) remarks that the notion of caste is fundamentally based on the segmental division of society, hierarchy, restriction on feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections, restriction on

marriage, and lack of unrestricted choice of occupation^{iv}. argues that the criteria such as endogamy, restriction on commensality between members of different castes, the hierarchical grading of castes (the best recognized position being that of Brahman at the top), the various kinds of contexts, especially those concerned with food, sex and ritual, a number of 'high' caste is liable to be 'polluted' by either direct or indirect contact with a number of 'low' caste, caste are very commonly associated with traditional occupations, and a man's caste is finally determined by the circumstances of his birth, unless he comes to be expelled from his caste for some ritual offence are pertained to the caste system.

Caste system oppresses lower-caste communities and gives powers to upper castes people. Historically, the system justified the subjugation of lower castes, allowing upper caste Nepali people to use their status to gain security and power. The huge population in South Asia is 'Dalits' or members of low castes, and are therefore treated as 'untouchable' by their social superiors. Dalits in Nepal face social, economic, cultural and political marginalization and routinely fall victim to both institutional and structural discrimination. Despite the legal provisions intended to eliminate caste discrimination in Nepal, the hates and crimes against Dalits are rampant. 'Caste' or 'Varna' is known as the basic foundation of Hindu society where different groups and individuals interact with each other in different ways (Bhattachan et al., 2009). Likewise, the caste system is understood as a division of society on the ground of differences of wealth, inherited rank, privileged profession, occupation or race. Based on the argument, the caste system has inculcating a seed of stratification among different social groups. Dalits are denied from socio-cultural point of view in the society identifying themselves as the lowest rung in the society. The socio-cultural foundation of the Hindu society sidelines Dalits from the mainstream activities of the society.

The Hindu caste system includes a fourfold of caste divisions; 'Brahmans', the priests and scholars, 'Kshetrias', the warriors and



administrators, 'Vaishyas', the merchants, and 'Sudras'(untouchables), and the servants and rubbish collectors (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2008). The Hindu religious scripture namely Manusmriti claims that the caste system is based on the differentiation of people following their works and professions (Ibid). Resorting to the position mentioned, it is clear that the caste system is belonged to the vertical division of the society establishing Dalits as the lowest caste. The legacy of making Dalits only the servants and rubbish collectors has not created vertical division of the society, but has also created a psychological division among the groups in the name of purity and impurity. Besides, the origin of caste system also follows many religious and biological views. The Hindu religious theory argues that the caste system had originated from Rig- Veda. It further states that the primal man, purush (male), destroyed himself in order to create a human society and the different parts of his body created the four different Varna. The Brahmans were from his head, the Kshetriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Sudra from his feet (Deshpande, 2010, p. 18). The very theory has been outspoken revealing religious myths and unscientific affairs. It is in favor of the high caste people to discriminate Dalits in the socio-cultural processes. The disintegration of Dalits in socio-cultural processes creates a situation of exclusion at all levels.

No doubt the caste system is closely associated with Hinduism in South Asia. It is the oldest survival social hierarchy in the world. Nonetheless, it is mostly dominant in Nepal and India. It is supposed to be one of the rigid stratification systems without any possibility to change one's caste or move between the caste categories in indeed. The caste of person is determined by his/her into a particular social group (Pyakurel, 2007, p. 2). Similarly, the caste system is an inseparable aspect of Hindu society and maintains close nexus with Hindu philosophy, religious beliefs, customs and traditions. On top of the philosophy, the strata wise functions and obligations are imposed. The caste system has contributed to the determination of stratification, differentiation and segmentation of Hindu society. With reference to Nepal, the institutionalized exploitations on Dalits date back to the medieval period in 13th century when King Jayasthiti Malla introduced the caste system (Pyakurel, 2007). Janga Bahadur Rana, the then the Prime Minister of Nepal, further formalized the caste system through a Civil Code in 1854 with the caste hierarchy ahead; (1) Sacred thread wearing or twice- born, (2) Liquor

drinking, (3) Touchable low castes, and (4) Untouchables(Hoffer, 2004). This way of caste division created a huge gap between Dalit and non-Dalit sections in Nepali society pushing Dalits towards a marginal space (Ibid).

In Nepal, the caste system remains as a form of discrimination that considers Dalits as untouchables. Untouchability gives a picture of discrimination perpetuated on Dalit communities who are believed to be impure and polluted. Therefore, the so-called high castes sprinkle holy water if their house is visited by untouchables (Bhattachan et al., 2009). Across the history of Nepal, Dalits are treated as low caste people and left behind in social, cultural and religious spheres and deprived from the human dignity and social justice due to caste based discrimination and untouchability (Bhattachan et al., 2009, p. 3).

'Social exclusion' and 'inclusion' are two terms widely used in recent years by politicians, social scientists and the public as well. Social exclusion and inclusion are multi-dimensional terms and their definitions, meanings and connotations are context dependent. Social exclusion as a concept has its origin in Europe, more specifically in France, and therefore, the issues addressed in the social exclusion context were specific to Europe. Subsequently, the concept was introduced in India where it has primarily focused on inequalities and exploitation based on membership of particular social groups and is seen in terms of exclusionary processes based on caste, gender, tribe and religious identities (Ziyauddin, 2009).

While concluding, social exclusion describes a process by which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged as they are discriminated against on the basis of their caste, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, descent, gender and so on where they live. Discrimination occurs in public institutions, such as the legal system or education and development services, as well as social institutions like the household and the community.

It is conveniently argued that caste is one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of social stratification, and results in injustices based on ascribed role differentiation. Caste stratification, traditionally associated with the Hindu religion, is sustained by an ideology that legitimizes inequality according to the status of birth. Interactions between castes is restricted, and the differential privileges and burdens are accorded, according to one's position in the caste hierarchy. The so-called higher castes and more particularly Brahmans, have over time developed rules that helped ensured superior



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Arguably, caste is one of oldest and most pervasive forms of social stratification, and results in injustices based on ascribed role differentiation. Caste stratification, traditionally associated with the Hindu religion, is sustained by an ideology that legitimizes inequality according to the status of birth. Interactions between castes is restricted, and differential privileges and burdens are accorded, according to one's position in the caste hierarchy. The so-called 'Higher castes' and more particularly the Brahmins, have over time developed rules that helped ensured superior status for themselves in the overall social hierarchy; the British colonisers helped entrench this system(Thapar, 1979).

Historically, caste controls have been most violently enforced on those at the lowest rungs of the caste ladder, the so-called scheduled castes or Dalits. Through daily practices of humiliation and coercion, the ideology of Dalits as 'untouchables' and hence as the others and outsiders to the caste system, persisted. They were viewed as regressive, barbaric and irrational in contrast to those within the caste system. It is important to recognize that social exclusion is a dynamic and on-going process, reflecting 'the dynamic process of being shut out', partially or fully, from any or all of several systems which influence the economic and social integration of people into the society(Commins, 2004, p. 68). Apply the concept to the problem of caste in India permits for better insights into how various forms of disadvantage overlap and reinforce one another(Rodgers et al., 1995).

Local Governance and Deliberation:Instances

Deliberative decision-making is a process by which the political decisions are made collectively resorting to reasons, facts, date and evidences for common public good. It is known as a formal way of reaching a decision on the issues of common public good following the best interests of the citizens. The deliberative decision-making contrasts with decisions that are either taken by one person or by a small group of elites leaving sections of society. The deliberation in decision-making enhances collective accountability, lack of which undermines its legitimacy and further endangers the ownership and sustainability of such decisions in indeed.

Deliberative decision making follows particular procedures and formalities as a formal rules-based process.

Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of the study is to explore the state of Dalits in local governance decision-making process. The specific objective of the study includes:

To explore the context of how Dalits participate in the decision-making of local governance.

II. Literature Review

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

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

The inclusive policies and programs of the state have made the local governments fill with Dalits and marginalized groups in diverse capacities of local governments. Despite the Dalit representation in offices of local governance, the social and



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

Methodology

The secondary sources of information have been used in the study. The sources include the published books, journals and reports to interpret the context.

III. Discussion

The composition of hymns of Rig-Veda classified caste on the basis of Varna into four social groups namely Brahmans or priests, Kshatriya, Vaisha and Sudra or untouchables. Rig-Veda stated that the castes were created from Purusha, the creature, where Brahmans originated from his mouth, Kshatriya originated from his arms, Vaisha originated from his thighs and Sudra from his feet. It was the beginning of caste classification which later became more rigorous in stipulating exclusive functions of society (Porter, 1895, p. 24). Sudra is the last social group in the graded caste system. Ambedkar (1936) has also explained race theory of caste system, where people are divided on the basis of race. According to Ambedkar, inequality is inherited in caste system, which is called 'graded inequality'.

The tolerance towards the institution of caste system has indeed been extraordinary. There has been and still are, instances, fairly high in number and severe in intensity that show the existence and thriving thereof, of this latent caste consciousness among the people. Caste has been a major impediment in the path to social progress and as Ambedkar (1936) points out, not just in the form of a counterproductive division of labor, but more importantly 'as a pernicious division of human beings into iron-curtained compartments'. Further another staunch opponent of caste system, Rammanohar Lohia, mentioned that 'caste restricts opportunity. Restricted opportunity constricts ability. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever narrowing the circles of people'(quoted in Agrawal, 2008). Caste thus, is mutually exclusive in that there is an inviolable code of conduct that divides the rights and privileges of the individuals in question. An individual from one caste can traditionally not tread freely into the arena of the privileges and rights of other; where a person

from the lower caste 'cannot' (for fear of imposition of certain sanctions), a person from the upper caste 'will not' (for fear of getting polluted).

Social cohesion does not exist in the society due to the reigning ideology of caste system. However, social cohesion refers to the kinds of bonds and characteristics that link members of a social group to one another and to the group as a whole, to overall quality of ties and relationships across groups in society, and to how these groups function together (Kaplan & Freeman, 2015). The argument is totally refuted. Social exclusion actively militates against the creation of a shared nationwide public. Through the different dynamics it generates, exclusion undermines trust and hinders collective action across groups (Berkman et al. 2008).

In summarizing the findings of comparative research on decentralization and participation in South Africa, Robins et al. (2008) point to five major limitations to citizen participation in governance: a) lack of political commitment or leadership on the part of local elites with regard to the new participatory spaces; b)lack of political mobilization of the poor; c)inadequate financial resources to guarantee the sustainability of participatory experiences; d)lack of institutionalization of participatory spaces and mechanism; and e) lack of technical and managerial capacity as well as inequalities of information among the participants.

Deliberative democracy theory introduces questions of morality and justice into politics searching for new meaning. The aim is to transform the classical notion of the public sphere by making deliberation a central feature in the democratic project. This often, problematic, as Mouffe suggests (1999), "in their attempt to reconcile the liberal tradition with the democratic one, deliberative democrats tend to erase the tension that exists liberalism and democracy and they are therefore unable to come to terms with the conflictual nature of democratic politics(p. 1)". Sonnickson (2008) argues that democracy theory must move past the antagonism between traditional liberal and deliberative forms of democracy if it wants to realize democracy's promise of greater inclusion and political equality.

Habermas(1996) &Healey (1996) are frequented quoted in papers which focus on communicative democracy/deliberative democracy (Falleth et al., 2007). These papers focus on interactions in planning processes and the involvement of public, private and civil society actors, while Mambrey(2008) draws on Habermas to examine e-Participation in Germany. For Habermas,



democracy requires a two-way communication between the government and civil society (Habermas, 1996) but O'Donnell and McCusker (2007) argue that the value of interactions is dependent on content, participant relations and context. Deliberative democracy is also linked to the theories of governance which addresses issues of power and influence and often incorporates a discussion of network governance. It allows, "to analyze participation and influence from all actors in urban planning, also including strong, resourceful developers, landowners, consultants, public agencies, politicians, etc." (Falleth et al., 2007, p. 7). The first component of deliberative democracy focuses on a formal notification of agendas to the stakeholders prior to the meeting fixing time and venue. The meeting minute is necessary to be maintained. In a society entrenched by a reigning ideology of caste system, the power elites decide the agendas for deliberation. Dalit exclusion is clearly seen in terms of having an access to selection of agendas. In the second component of deliberative democracy, inclusion is need of the concern for deliberation. The socio-cultural power relations in the society is both equally responsible for inclusion and exclusion. An inclusion of Dalits is only to complete the formality of the meeting. In the third component of participation, Dalits are symbolically participated but constrained by unequal power relations to influence the decision-making through their concerns and voices. The fourth component of deliberative democracy emphasizes that deliberations and discussions should be accompanied by reason and evidence. In a society divided in a caste lines, the Dalit concerns are not progressively realized. The decisions are motivated by the bargaining and negotiation between the power holders. The fifth component of deliberative democracy adheres to the collective concerns and issues of society for deliberation. In a socio-cultural processes of caste based society, the extent of collectiveness is relatively determined and the domination of non-Dalits is clearly seen. The democracy also focuses on the capabilities of oppressed and marginalized groups to make a decision-making more fruitful. In the humiliating power relations, the capability is relative and Dalits cannot influence as a caste line setting remains in the society. The core of the deliberative democracy is firstly to develop a situation of consensual atmosphere for decisions through deliberations and secondly to decide through voting despite a lack of consensus. The limitation of deliberative democracy is that the consensus among the stakeholders is not free from a caste line polarization on the one hand

and Dalit concerns are sidelined by voting through a majority of non-Dalits on the other hand.

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