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Breaking Barriers: Dalit Women's Journey from Marginalization to Inclusion in Local Governance

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Abstract

The entitled article "Breaking Barriers: Dalit Women's Journey from Marginalization to Inclusion in Local Governance" casts light a brief anthropological analysis about the representation of Dalit women and their influence on local governance in Nepal. As per the new Constitution of Nepal 2072BS, where marginalized communities are privileged to represent in political platform through the quota system. This study is carried out among the Dalit women of Tulsipur Metropolitan City, Dang. For the data, different Dalit women who are representing in local government system are taken as primary respondents. The elected Dalit women's inclusion and representation have got the authority to make the vital decision on local level which can affect the life of common people. But unfortunately, they haven't exercised their full right. Most of them complain about the interference of ward president on their decision and work. The decision of Dalit women ward members are not implemented as a result they are losing their prestige. Besides that, elected Dalit women do not have the access on the program and the budget allocated for the empowerment of Dalit community. Social impact of utilizing government's quota system can be seen but not in reality but in rhetoric. However, they have started breaking the barriers traditionally imposed upon them for years.

Keywords

Women, Dalit, Dalit women, Politics, Gender, Representation, Marginalization, Inclusion, Local Governance.

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1. Prelude

The article, entitled "Breaking Barriers: Dalit Women's Journey from Marginalization to Inclusion in Local Governance" casts light about the situation of Dalit women representations on the local government of Nepal. This article also studies about the elected Dalit women ward member of Tulsipur Sub metropolitan of Dang district focusing on the situation of elected Dalit women, their role on decision-making and finally their impact on the whole Dalit community. After the first historical local election of Nepal held on two phases the second local election was conducted in 13 May 2022 after the promulgation of 2015 constitution. Included 6567 Dalit women on the local level. There was the historical representation of Dalit women on the local government due to the provision of quota system mentioned on the constitution of Nepal 2015. This paper is focused on the elected Dalit women representative of Tulsipur Sub metropolitan of Dang district, where they represent from marginal community to the inclusive local government.

The constitution of Nepal 2015 made the compulsory provision of including Dalit women on every ward which definitely has boosted the confidence level of Dalit women representatives but still the report of facing the untouchability by them come frequently on the newspaper. As for example in June 2, 2018, Mana Sarki (45), the elected Dalit woman ward representative of Naraharinath-9, Kalikot was killed by the so-called upper caste local people because of false accusation of having affair with the so-called uppercaste male.

According to the 2021 census, Tulsipur Sub-Metropolitan has a total population of 180,734. Within that, Dalit groups such as Kami (6.9%), Damai/Dholi (3.6%), Sarki (2.1%), Chamar (0.2%) and other 12.8%. The national statistics office has identified 27

Dalit castes in Nepal where 5 Hill Dalits and 22 terai Dalits. Among them bishwokarma from hill is 5%, pariyar/damai 1.9% and

mijar/sarki 1.6%. in a smaller population badi is 11,47 and Gaine 6,971 (NSO 2021). Their literacy rate in total is 76.2%, while the average for Dalits lags behind at 67.4%. notably, terai Dalits (51.9%) endure far lower literacy compared to Hill Dalits (75.7%). Overall 36% falls under the Dalit community.

The article explores about the social impact of Dalit women representation on local government and impact on overall Dalit community. According to the preamble of Local Governance Act 2055 B.S it is expedient to, *"make provisions conducive to the enjoyment of the fruits of democracy through the utmost participation of the sovereign people in the process of governance by way of decentralization, institutionalize the process of development by enhancing the participation of all the people including the ethnic communities, indigenous people and down-trodden as well as socially and economically backward groups in bringing out social equality in mobilizing and allocating means for the development of their own region and in the balanced and equal distribution of the fruits of development, have institutional development of local bodies capable of bearing responsibility, by providing such responsibility and power at the local level as is necessary to formulate and carry out plans, and constitute local bodies for the development of the local self-governance system in a manner that they are able to make decisions on the matters affecting the day-to-date needs and lives of the people, by developing local leadership"*.

The local election was held on 14th May and 14th June 2017 B.S after the two decades. It has been the milestone for Dalit community in terms of participation on state. The constitution of Nepal 2015 has guaranteed the right of Dalit under the Fundamental right under the clause 40. It has been clearly written that 'Dalit shall have the right to participate in all bodies of the State on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion'. Beside that women right is also guaranteed under the Fundamental right under the clause 38. It is well written that *"women shall have the right to participate in all bodies of the State on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion"*. On the basis of the above mentioned provision of the constitution, government has made the local government inclusive where the two women are compulsory among them one Dalit woman on every ward of the notion. This provision has made the participation of 14352 (41%) woman along with Dalit woman representatives are 6567 (45%) (Election Commission, 2017).

2. Literature Review

Some of the Anthropological theories and political theories are reviewed and discussed in this section to highlight the theoretical linkages and explanations of the relationships between the dependent and independent variables.

2.1 Concept of Political Participation

According to Uhlaner (2001 cited in Lamprianou, 2013), there is no universally accepted definition of political participation. For Huntington and Nelson (1976) for instance, political participation is an activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making. Similarly, Nie and Verba, (1972 cited in Gaventa *et.al* 1999) defined it as “legal activities by individuals that are directly aimed at influencing the choice of governmental personnel and the actions they take.” These two definitions focused on the objectives of the political participation which is influencing the selection of government officials and their decision-makings. Whereas Diemer (2012) and Riley *et al.* (2010), on the other hand, emphasized political participation as political engagement and outlined its means of participation.

Similarly, Riley *et al.* (2010, cited in Lamprianou, 2013) approached political participation as an engagement and asserted that it has traditionally been thought of as a set of rights and duties that involve formally organized civic and political activities (e.g., voting or joining a political party). Both approaches are necessary to conceptualize political participation in this research. For this study, political participation is conceptualized as an engagement through which individuals could participate in traditional forms of political participation to influence the choice of government officials and their decision-makings.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 also gives space to the participation of Dalit women on the bodies of the government. Under Part 3 - Fundamental Rights and Duties and the section 40.1 says *Dalit shall have the right to participate in all bodies of the State on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion. Special provision shall be made by law for the empowerment, representation and participation of the Dalit community in public services as well as other sectors of employment* (The Constitution of Nepal 2072 B.S). In addition, under the section 40.7 the facilities conferred by this Article to the Dalit community must be

distributed in a just manner so that the Dalit women, men and Dalit in all communities can obtain such facilities proportionately.

2·2 Anthropological Theories on Women and Politics

In political anthropology, women's participation in governance is best understood through multiple theoretical lenses. Feminist political anthropology emphasizes that power and authority are inherently gendered, shaping how women experience inclusion in political structures (Ortner, 1996). The public-private dichotomy further explains how women entering formal politics challenge cultural boundaries that historically confined them to domestic roles (Rosaldo, 1974). Intersectionality demonstrates that women's political experiences are mediated not only by gender but also by caste, class, and ethnicity, which is evident in the struggles of Dalit women leaders in South Asia, including Nepal (Crenshaw, 1989; Tamang, 2009).

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital and Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality show that even when women occupy formal positions, their authority is often limited by patriarchal structures and disciplinary practices. Yet, practice theory reminds us that women exercise agency by negotiating, resisting, and reshaping governance systems from within, contributing to more inclusive forms of political culture (Ortner, 2006). Political anthropology highlights how governance is shaped by both state structures and cultural practices, and in Nepal, women's entry into politics has often been mediated by patriarchal norms and elite interests. Yet, Dalit and marginalized women demonstrate agency by negotiating these constraints, expanding the political field, and challenging dominant narratives of leadership and authority. Such dynamics illustrate the anthropological insight that governance is a lived process, constantly reshaped by the everyday struggles of those historically excluded from power (Tamang, 2009).

2·3 Dalit Women and Decision-making

Historically, Dalit communities are patriarchal, women and girls live at the edge of society. Families are run by strong patriarchal values, which often limit Dalit women's freedom of choice or self-expression in household decision-making. The data shows that women accept their subordinate position within the household and do not believe they have a right to participate in family decision-making, or to freely express themselves.

Dalit women have less freedom of decision-making because of patriarchal values, economic dependent and illiteracy. They are the good followers of the decision made by their husband (Durga Sob, 2017).

Decision-making is also influenced by caste. We find variation in different communities in the society. *Women's decision-making power is relatively low in Dalit community in comparison of non-dalit women. The reason behind is the violence towards Dalit women, low economy, caste and gender-based discrimination (Durga sob, Margadarshan 2017).* It has been found that stronger the Hindu value, the weaker is power in both time use and decision patterns. In other, women decide what to do and who is to go where (Acharya and Bennett, 1981).

Among communities such as the Sherpa and the Gurung the kinship patterns use more flexible in comparison of non-dalit women. In these societies, women are accorded more decision-making power, have more access to resources and property, and are more likely to conduct business on their families behalf (UNICEF, 1996) it will be helpful to see how is the role.

2.5 Political Situation of Women

Following the restoration of democracy in 1990, all political parties have formed women's organizations aligned to them. But these women organizations have limited roles in the political decision-making process within the parties. Despite their rhetoric no women organization had been able to put gender issues in the real political agenda (Prasad and Sahay, 2000).

Inheritance rights to daughters figured prominently in the election manifests of the communist of Nepal United Marxist-Leninist in the 1991 election following the restoration of democracy. But was subsequently dropped from their manifests when it felt it had a winning chance to form the government in 1994 when mid-term polls were announced. Women candidate of political choose to stay silent in their election campaign. Raising gender issues in the political campaign is considered counterproductive (Pyakurel and Thakuri, 1998).

The above literatures are very informative and successful in providing information about the general status of women in Nepal. It will of course help to study socio-economic background of women also. Hence this study seeks to add to knowledge on the area of gender and local governance particularly in the Tulsipur Sub metropolitan of Dang District, Nepal.

3. Methodology

This article is written based on exploratory cum descriptive research design. The exploratory research designs were assessing the perception of society and its people on Dalit women representation and their participation local governance. On the other hand, descriptive research design describes the representation of Dalit women and their influence in local governance. Different Dalit women representatives from different ward were taken as 10 respondents of Dalit women ward member 3 were key informants and 10 were participated in focused group discussion.

4. Data Analysis and Presentation

Representation of women has always been an issue to the women in the context of Nepal either it is from Dalit or from other community. Representation on the state is considered as the most powerful form of empowerment. For that various efforts, movements and laws are formulated to increase the participation of women on politics seen in the world for women empowerment. Dalits are still not entertained to participate in any kind of space due to caste issues.

They are sometimes made a irony and sometimes a victim. Most of the countries set the criteria of minimum level of women participation on parliament and the government. Such provision is mostly seen on developing nation which aim to increase the participation of women on politics. Being a patriarchal society, Nepal is breaking those barriers and moving to the inclusive government system. Though it is declared secular state but Hindu religion still is in dominant role where women exercise less right and freedom. But the Constitution of 2015 is considered as landmark for the marginalized community providing much right and freedom.

The constitution has spoken clearly about the three forms of government in Nepal i.e, Center, Province and Local. It has made mandatory to participate 2 women with 1 Dalit women on ward level. This is one of the historical achievements for women and Dalit. Nearly seven thousand Dalit women are elected as ward representative on 756 local government of the country. This constitutional provision has the great impact not only on political empowerment but also on their overall development.

4.1 Caste Structure of Respondents

Caste is the powerful social categories of Nepali society that labels people in terms of so-called high caste and low caste. The

so-called low caste people are termed as Dalit and regarded as untouchable and forbidden in the public places. Within Dalit community also, there is the great diversity of caste.

Table-1: Caste Diversity of Dalit Women Representation of Tulsipur Sub Metropolitan

S. No.	Caste	Number	Percentage
1.	Kami	5	50.0
2.	Damai	3	30.0
3.	Sarki	2	20.0

Source: Field Survey, 2020.

4.2 Decision-making and Policy Influence in Local Governance

Decision-making has been one of the major tools to influence the people. The elected Dalit women representatives have got the authority to make the vital decision on local level which can affect the life of common people. But unfortunately, they haven't exercised their full right. Most of them complain about the interference of ward president on their decision and work.

The decision of Dalit women ward members are not implemented as a result they are losing their prestige. Besides that, elected Dalit women do not have the access on the program and the budget allocated for the empowerment of Dalit community. Ward president does not give the authority to use of budget allocated for Dalit community. As a result, they have to face a lot of criticism of being irresponsible towards Dalit community. On the other part other representative along with non-Dalit community also criticize of being useless despite getting the quota. Thus, decision-making largely affects the life of Dalit community but the voice of elected Dalit women representative is suppressed in the ward office.

The obligatory presence of Dalit women on local government has really influenced and motivated Dalit community. The participation of Dalit women on state mechanism has increased the participation of Dalit community on politics. Different age groups mostly Dalit youths have joined political parties according to their ideology and the opportunity given to the youths. So, gradually girls are joining the political parties in the hope to be the ward member and serve the community.

Politics has been the determining factor of the society. It has the great potential to empower the people by addressing various discrimination and malpractices of the society. Dalit community knowing the fact, literate as well as illiterate people have joined the politics in the hope to eradicate the so-called caste-based discrimination and untouchability. Political parties are also compelled to give space on their parties to dalit community due to the compulsory provision made by the constitution 2015. There is good competition within parties to make their parties inclusive. Ultimately the provision made by the constitution has highly influenced and motivated dalit community.

5. Major Findings

Major findings of this article may differ from other researches. Dalit women ward member have also faced caste-based discrimination and untouchability even after being elected as ward member even in their office. Dalit women ward members have not exercised their decision-making right in the ward office as ward chairperson interferes them. Ward chairperson hardly allocate the budget for the empowerment of Dalit community. Dalit women ward members are not provided the information about the meeting and other activities of the ward. Ward chairperson do not attend or ignore the program organized by Dalit organization as they send Dalit women ward member saying it is her department. Educated Dalit youth are joining the politics with the hope to end the caste-based discrimination and untouchability from the society. Dalit women ward members are also seen neglecting their own community. The family of Dalit women ward representatives have not supported them some somewhere. Dalit people also seem unsupportive towards the elected ward members.

6. Conclusion

Conclusions are drawn from the elected Dalit women ward representatives of Tulsipur sub metropolitan. Dalit women representatives are facing multiple forms of visible and invisible discrimination from ward president, other members and specially so-called upper caste people of their own area. Their participation is just in quota not in practice. They have been used as rubber stamp because no voices of Dalits are heard and no Dalit friendly programs. In the study area, they do not allocate enough budget for the

upliftment of Dalit and influence of Dalit women toward the comitee and local body is minimum.

Caste based discrimination and untouchability is the major problem of Dalit community. The constitution of Nepal 2015 has provided much space to Dalit community on state mechanism. It has made obligatory to include one Dalit women member on ward committee of the local government. This research explores the situation of selected Dalit women representative of Tulsipur sub metropolitan on discrimination towards them, their decision-making right as well as impact on Dalit community.

The level of discrimination towards elected Dalit women is different than other women. Elected Dalit women face invisible form of discrimination whereas other women directly face caste-based discrimination and untouchability. Elected representatives face indirect form of discrimination like if any Dalit organization invite ward president as chief guest for the program they do not attend the program instead they send Dalit women as representative saying it is her department. Similarly, the plan and budget proposed by them are not included on the annual plan of the ward. They are made signature on the ward minute without providing the proper information. Similarly, Dalit women representing executive committee of local government are not provided enough time for speaking during the meeting. Thus, the instances prove that elected Dalit women face invisible form of discrimination.

Similarly, Dalit women have not been able to fully exercise their right to decision-making. Although major decision-making right of ward is fully exercised by the ward president but still there are some areas where Dalit women can exercise decision-making right. As for e.g. there is the heading of Dalit budget on almost every ward but Dalit women do not have the full right of using the budget. The ward president has the total control on it.

The representation of Dalit women on local government has highly influenced the whole Dalit community. The impact is seen mostly on educated Dalit youths primarily on girls and social activist women. They are gradually joining the politics. It has highly contributed on the empowerment of Dalit community. Despite that, Dalit women ward members are also getting some respect from the society which has motivated the whole community towards politics.

7. Summary

The representation of Dalit women in local government is a great milestone in the politics of Nepal. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has made the representation of Dalit women mandatory as a result nearly 6567 Dalit women got the opportunity to be the ward member of the local government. Some of them are working as mayor, deputy mayor, deputy chair-person of rural municipality as well as member of executive committee of the local government as well as member of judiciary committee. This article studies about the selected Dalit women ward member of Tulsipur Sub metropolitan of Dang district focusing on the situation of elected Dalit women, their role on decision-making and finally their impact on the whole Dalit community.

The situation of elected Dalit women is different from each other. They differ in terms of political parties, education, caste, marital status, employment etc. Majority of them belonged to Nepali Congress party, most of them were under SLC. Similarly, out of 10 representatives 8 had their own business. The diversity in caste is also seen. The elected women belonging to Bishwakarma are 5, 3 were damai and 2 belonged to Sarki community.

Similarly, Dalit women find difficult to participate in decision-making process. The meaningful participation is only the showing teeth. The ward president fully exercises the decision-making right and uses them as rubber stamp. Many ward members complain of signing the minute without knowing the meeting of the ward. If they ignore then the ward president convinces them by promising to allocate the budget for Dalit community coming year. Despite that, they are unable to use the allocated the budget for the Dalit community freely as the ward president interferes there too. Thus, the ward members are treated as dummy by the ward chairperson.

Finally, the mandatory provision of elected Dalit women on local government has highly motivated Dalit community. The immediate impact is seen mainly on educated Dalit youth, women and social activist who are joining the politics with the hope to break the caste-based discrimination and untouchability. The long-term impact will be seen in the form of eradication of caste based discrimination and untouchability from the society. Social impact of utilizing government's quota system can be seen but not in reality but in rhetoric.

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