Dalits and Federalism: A Study of Public Opinion on Federalism

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Introduction

Dalit movement, along with Janajati and Madhesi movements, has been a major force in political and social transformation in Nepal since 1990. Federalism, one of the demands of such transformations, has become a contentious issue for Dalits. Dalit leaders had initially mostly been centered on ensuring proportional representation in central and local governments, along with special rights as a compensation for their historical oppression (Bhattachan 2008). However, after the Peoples' Movement of 2006, with Janajatis and Madhesis demanding provinces along ethnic and regional lines, Dalit leaders and scholars began to discuss the relevance of federalism for Dalits as well as possibility of their own Dalit province. This issue climaxed with State Restructuring High Commission Report suggesting provision of a non-territorial province for Dalits.

But is a Dalit province, or federalism, needed for Dalits? Is the issue of federalism and Dalit province an aspiration, or a concern, of common Dalits? Or is it just an interest of Dalit leaders and elites? This paper tries to analyse public opinion of Dalits, based on public opinion in two VDCs of Nepal, on the various issues related to federalism, including aspirations of Dalits in the proposed constitution and perceptions of Dalits on successive political movements and government provisions for Dalits since 1990.

This article is divided into three sections. The first, literature review, reviews literature on Dalit and federalism in Nepal, both before and after the CA election in 2008. In the methodology section, in which demographic characteristics of respondents are given. The findings and discussion section include views of Dalit on political movements in Nepal, including the People's Movement of 2006; federalism, including identity-based federalism and especially the provision of autonomous states of Newar and Tamang as the respondents are based on these areas; the demand of Dalit province and proportional representation and reservation.; and finally on the aspirations of Dalit on the new constitution. The final section provides conclusion of the study.

Literature Review

The issue of state restructuring, especially federalism, in Nepal has drawn attention of both Dalit and non-Dalit national scholars and leaders, as well as international scholars. There were few studies and opinions on the issue of Dalits and federalism before the election of CA in 2008. The most significant

one was Koirala et al. (2006) and Bhattachan (2008). The issue gained momentum after the formation of CA, and there came intense debates.

There have been a number of views and reviews on the applicability of federalism for Dalits by Dalit scholars and activists themselves. The most notable ones published during the term of CA and after its dissolution are BK et al. (2008) and Vishokarma (2012), incorporating views mostly from Dalit scholars and some non-Dalit scholars on Dalit rights. With the demand of identity- or ethnic-based federalism by ethnic groups and Madhesis, and recently with the release of the two reports (Report of CA Committee on State Restructuring and the Distribution of State Power and State Restructuring High Commission Report), the issue of Dalit province has accelerated the debate and has polarized the Dalit scholars and leaders. Sushil BK, one of the editors of Vishokarma et al. (2012), divides scholars on four categories: (1) those who demand territorial province, (2) those who demand non-territorial province, (3) those who remain content with proportional representation, and (4) those who seek alternative to federal restructuring of the state itself. He attributes the belatedness of Dalit views on the issue of federalism to the original consensus among Dalit and non-Dalits leaders that a Dalit province is not needed and possible because Dalits are scattered all over Nepal and other reasons. Similarly, the issue of non-territorial province was also nascent in those days. However, proponents of territorial federalism argue that if ethnic groups who have less population than that of Dalits (such as Limbus) and who are less discriminated by the state (such as Newars) are demanding their ethnic province, then why not for a Dalit province (see BK et al. 2008 and Vishokarma 2012).

Another one is the issue of identity. Dalit scholars agree that Dalit identity is a temporary one, albeit more ephemeral than ethnic or regional identity. On this basis, some Dalit scholars (e.g., Ahuti 2010) argue that a Dalit province is not applicable on the basis of this ephemeral identity, as Dalits will sooner or later be “dissolved” into their respective ethnic groups, e.g., Hill Dalits into Hill caste groups such as Bahuns and Chhetris, Madhesi Dalits into Madhesi caste groups, and Newar Dalits into Newars. Others, however, see this as a long process and that Dalit province is needed for their Dalit identity and advocate territorial or non-territorial province.

The views of non-Dalit and international scholars are important in that they drew upon a wide variety of theoretical and conceptual model on the issue. Middleton (2008) points out to the challenges to implementation of reservation and federalism in Nepal in reworking administrative boundaries along ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines, along with serious challenges in implementation of policies of positive discrimination to groups like Dalits. Townsend and Shneiderman (2008:40) warn that rushing to implement policies of federalism and reservation for immediate political effect without a thorough evaluation of their administrative and social ramifications may cause more harm than good over the long haul. Follesdal (2011) discusses, theoretically, various models of federal elements and their appropriateness

for various groups. According to him, non-territorial minority rights arrangement, with provisions for positive discrimination, will be helpful for minorities like Dalits who are scattered within other groups geographically.

Two reports on state restructuring are highly important, and are also controversial. The first one is the report of the CA Committee on State Restructuring and the Distribution of State Power (2010), which divided Nepal into 14 provinces on the basis of identity and capability, with no provision for a Dalit province. It had proposed additional 3% and 5% representation in federal and state composition in making provisions for proportionate representation of Dalits at all levels of power structure. Another is State Restructuring High Commission Report (2012), which proposed one non-territorial Dalit province and 10 territorial provinces, with identity and capability as bases for restructuring. It also proposed right to self-determination to Dalits. As for special provisions, Dalits would get additional 10% representation in addition to proportional representation according to their population in state apparatus and additional 5% in political apparatus at all levels.

Public Opinion

Interest in public opinion is historically linked to the rise of popular government (Darity 2008). Democratic societies settle issues by discussion and negotiation when they arise. Citizens have the right to be informed about any controversial or emerging issues. Lippmann (1922) notes that public perceive the world through stereotypes fed them by the media. So, in any research on public opinion, it is necessary to explore what media the public is exposed to and whether their opinions were shaped by the media or not. According to Neuman (1986), even in democratic countries, however, it is not always possible or necessary that the governments agree with and listen to the general public on every issue. He notes that there is the "all-too-obvious gap" between opinions of the public as revealed by systematic survey interviewing and the programs and policies of the government.

The practice of seeking public opinion in a systematic way is very nascent in Nepal, as democracy was instituted in Nepal only after 1990. So, it comes as no surprise that there have been no studies on the views of Dalit people themselves on the issue of federalism and Dalit province. The one by Hachhethu et al. (2008:6) on a survey seeking grass-root opinions of both citizens and elites on issues of restructuring the Nepalese state and democracy showed that the Pahadi caste groups (high caste and Dalits) favored a unitary state.

Another study of finding citizen opinion on federalism was by Interdisciplinary Analysts (IDA), conducted in June and July in 2009, in which they found support levels of Hill castes and Madhesi caste groups and Madhesi Dalits for ethnic-based federalism were around 10 percent. Moreover, the lowest support level for ethnic federalism was found among

Hill Dalits and Muslims at around 5 percent. These findings, according to them, were largely in line with what the Carter Center (2010) had during the latter half of 2009.

One of the objectives of the present research was to assess the availability and use of government provisions for Dalits from 1990 to the present. This mostly includes the social security benefits for Dalits as well as provisions such as quotas in different apparatus of the state. On this issue, National Planning Commission (2012) had conducted a survey on the assessment of social security allowance in Nepal. It found that Dalit, along with disabled, were found to be less aware of the social security. Most of the beneficiaries (80 percent) said the allowance was insufficient to meet their personal and household expenditure. The survey results indicate that poor, women, and Dalits are in need of more allowances.

Methodology

The study was conducted in 2012 in two semi-urban VDCs of Nepal: Matatirtha VDC in the western part of the Kathmandu Valley and Churiyamai VDC joining the Hetunda city in Makwanpur. In Churiyamai VDC, there were about 180 households at the time of the research, predominantly Vishokarma caste, the most dominant Dalit caste of Nepal (Plan 2009). In Matatirtha VDC, there were 80 households of Dalits, predominantly Sarkis. Moreover, Dalits in the former are interspersed among the dominant Tamang ethnic group in the region, while Dalits in the latter are surrounded by Bahuns-Chhetris and fall under the proposed Newar province in the ethnic-based federalism. Thus, a comparative study was attempted based on these two different Dalit castes in two different areas surrounded by two different ethnic/caste groups.

The study was conducted mainly through semi-structured, qualitative interviews. Interviews with some local Dalit leaders and non-Dalits were also carried out to seek explanation on the views expressed by common Dalits and also to know the situation of Dalits. Qualitative information thus gathered was analyzed by identifying common patterns and themes.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Public opinion varies according to the different characteristics of the population, including region, race, religion, ethnicity, class, and educational attainment. In the present study, different demographic characteristics of Dalits were noted and their opinions analyzed in terms of these characteristics.

Age: The respondents were selected according to their age, between age 25 and 60, because I assumed that Dalits below this age, the youth, would not be interested and active in politics, and people above age 60 might not be more knowledgeable about the current party politics and the new concepts of federalism and state restructuring. This assumption was more or less found

to be true, although some youth and elder people had much nuanced understanding of the current social and political processes.

Occupation and economic condition: In Churiyamai, only those Vishokarma who had modernized their traditional occupation of blacksmithing, for example, by shifting their work to making *khukuri* for commercial purposes have continued their traditional occupation. Sunars (goldsmiths) were mostly working in Kathmandu other major cities. Others had mostly become laborers. Pariyars were in small numbers, and two families interviewed were still doing their traditional tailoring occupation and owned shops. Some Dalits were drivers. Most women were housewives. Most Dalits interviewed in Churiyamai were poor as revealed by their migratory, landless, and laborer status. However, it should be mentioned that there are many wealthy Sunars in Churiyamai, who were not interviewed as they live mostly in Kathmandu.

In Matatirtha, Dalits in general, including those interviewed, would like to rate themselves as middle class. Almost all men interviewed were doing their traditional occupation of shoe-making, and a few had their own shops. One man worked in a five-star hotel as a cook, and another owned a grocery shop. Women were mostly housewives but some assisted their husbands in shoe-making. All attributed their compulsion to do the traditional occupation of shoe-making to their lack of education and lack of “source-force” to get a salaried job. A local Dalit leader and intellectual was a schoolteacher, and another local leader was unemployed but active in politics.

Education: Almost all Dalits interviewed both in Churiyamai and Matatirtha, both men and women, above the age 40 were either illiterate or had not completed secondary education. In Churiyamai, this can be attributed to their poverty and lack of education from their original homeplace, mostly various remote villages of Makwanpur. Few students were studying in colleges. However, all children of respondents were enrolled, mostly in nearby public schools and also in a missionary school in Hetunda city.

In Matatirtha, a few respondents had passed SLC but did not get higher education. Among them was a 53-year-old man who had passed SLC in 1980 but was working as a cobbler in the streets of Kathmandu. Between the two whom I identified as local leaders, one school teacher had master’s degree and another had passed SLC but did not continue further education. A growing number of Dalits are getting higher education, both men and women.

Political activism: About political party affiliations, some politically active Dalits say that although Churiyamai was a stronghold of Maoists during the insurgency, but no more now. I encountered one young man, age 25, who was a disqualified Maoist soldier. In Matatirtha, currently many Dalits are Maoist supporters as they say Maoists have started development activities

there that other parties did not do since 1990. They said they were not politically active as they disliked politics as practiced in Nepal since 1990.

Media: The media exposure of Dalits in both Churiyamai and Matatirtha was low. In Churiyamai, many Dalits did not own a TV; in Matatirtha all of them had TV. It was observed that Dalits who worked at home, such as blacksmiths in Churiyamai and cobblers in Matatirtha, listened to the radio while working. The main reason for their not listening to radio, watching TV, or reading newspaper was that they were illiterate and could not understand the news, especially so for women. Moreover, most of the women complained that there was not enough electricity to watch TV as in the evening; that they had no leisure time to watch TV as they needed to do household work; and that their children liked to watch cartoons on TV.

Religion: In both Churiyamai and Matatirtha, as all over Nepal, many Dalits have converted to Christianity. In Matatirtha, surprisingly, there were four churches in the Takhel, the ward on which I conducted the study. However, religion was found to have no effect on the responses regarding the major issues of the study. A few Christian Dalits mentioned that the state should be secular and people should be allowed to follow whatever religion they choose.

Land ownership: The major problem of Dalits in Churiyamai is landlessness. According to Krishna Bahadur Sunar, chair of VDC Dalit Coordination Committee, about 25 households were landless; some have bought a small piece of land, 1 or 2 *gattas* (1 *gatta* equals about 350 sq. m.). However, in Matatirtha, all had their houses in their own land and had 1/2 to 2 *ropanis* of land (1 *ropani* equals 508 sq. m.). However, the village is situated near the bank of a stream and in the rainy season there is risk of flooding the houses.

Caste-based Discrimination

Churiyamai: Caste discrimination, including untouchability, was noted in both areas. In Churiyamai, the Dalits were situated among the Tamangs, who are an ethnic group and do not generally practice untouchability, but Dalits fear them because they are in minority and many are landless squatters. All admit that after the 1990 democracy movement there was some reduction in untouchability. During 1996-2006, Churiyamai was a stronghold of Maoist rebellion, and some attributed the decrease in untouchability due to fear of Maoists as they used to persecute discriminators, while others regarded increasing education, modernization, increased awareness, and development as responsible for the reduction. All agree that there is no complete reduction of untouchability and discrimination. Moreover, there are frequent *baithaks* (meetings), especially among women's groups, where Dalits are made aware of their rights, including on the issue of untouchability and punishment against offenders. Another factor affecting discrimination is conversion to Christianity. Christian Dalits feel proud to say that they are not discriminated after they converted.

Matatirtha: The issue of untouchability in Matatirtha is very different. Dalits there are surrounded by Chhetris and Bahuns, who do not let the Dalits in their houses. Their relations are strained in this regard. Current incidents of untouchability and discrimination are rife here. My respondents said that Bahuns and Chhetris of Matatirtha, although being a part of the capital city, are the most conservative in the whole country. In public places also, such as in taps, there are subtle forms of discrimination. Almost all women interviewed were surprised that in Matatirtha the discrimination, albeit in a covert form, remained while in their maternal homes in various parts of Kathmandu and outside Kathmandu untouchability had disappeared. Similarly, a 30-year-old Dalit activist told me that his friends from outside Kathmandu were surprised to find discrimination prevalent here, whereas such practices have eliminated elsewhere in Nepal.

Although most people commented that in a particular shop they needed to wash the glass after drinking tea, the most cautious ones told me that it was no longer compulsory but some people washed voluntarily. I found women more expressive on this issue. For example, a woman told me that not only high-castes do not allow Dalits inside their house, high-caste women also rebuke other shopkeepers for letting the Dalits enter their shops and not asking them to wash the glass.

It is really surprising that high-castes there, although most of them, according to the Dalits, have higher education and are in higher government posts, discriminate. The case can be illustrated by the experience of a schoolteacher, who is now teaching in a school in another village because he was not allowed to teach in the school of his village by the Bahun-Chhetris:

Caste-based discrimination, I found, does not eliminate with education, nor does it with modernity. The cultural aspect gets deeply rooted. Only social awareness will change it. Education provides only the base but does not automatically lead to awareness and consciousness. I myself taught in this school for two to three years in 1992. The school staff would clean my glass but people of my caste needed to clean their own glasses when they drank tea inside the school in the school canteen. Children of our caste were not allowed to enter the school canteen. Then we protested against it and warned either to allow the children inside or to close the canteen. Only then did they allow. One has two choices: to bear it or to fight it. Right is gained only by fighting. This incident proves that education alone does not lead to awareness, only fighting will.

Findings and Discussion

Political Movements

In Nepal, since 1950, there have been many political and social movements for upliftment of various excluded groups, including Dalits. They are the

1990 democratic movement, Maoist rebellion of 1996-2006, 2006 People's Movement, and the rise and demise of constituent assembly 2008-2012. In this study, there was an attempt to get the perceptions of Dalits on these movements on the issue of whether or to what extent these movements have addressed the problems of common Dalits.

In both Churiyamai and Matatirtha, the most significant change brought about by these successive movements was on the practice of untouchability. My informants agree that untouchability practice decreased somewhat after 1990 and significantly after the peace process in 2006. The extent of influence of Maoist insurgency in reducing untouchability was, however, debated. Understandably, the problem of untouchability on Dalits by Tamangs, an ethnic group, in Churiyamai was never as severe as by Bahun-Chhetris in Matatirtha.

Regarding economic changes in the lives of Dalits, most Dalits informed me that such movements did not affect their lives economically. In Churiyamai, most blacksmiths either continued their traditional occupation or had become laborers. In Matatirtha, most cobblers were continuing their traditional occupation. In Churiyamai, I met one woman who was able to get a job in a factory in Hetunda due to Maoist support. Similarly, in Matatirtha, I met one man who got job through Dalit quota as he was a Maoist activist. This indicates that Dalits in general have not benefited even by being involved in politics. Moreover, in Churiyamai, the in-ward migration and out-ward migration of Dalits was found to be high, and that also precludes fixed Dalit polity.

In both places, people disliked politics very much, whether they are young or old, Christian or Hindu, men or women. Christians in Churiyamai frankly said that they disliked politics. In Matatirtha, although most showed lack of interest in politics, many Dalits reported that they tried their best to secure either scholarship for their children's college education, or jobs for their children by political connections.

Federalism

The main objective of the research was to assess the understanding of the issue of federalism and their opinion about the need of federalism, including on the need for a Dalit province and the issue of proportional representation and special rights for Dalits in the new constitution.

It was found that most Dalits (28 out of 33 in Churiyamai and 17 out of 24 in Matatirtha) interviewed either had not heard the term federalism or did not know or understand the meaning of the term. However, those who were educated and/or were politically active understood it and could express their opinions in detail and showed understanding. In Churiyamai, they explicitly stated that because of lack of education they also could not understand the news and debates on the issue and thus did not listen to the radio or watch TV; due to illiteracy, most could not read newspapers. They

also agreed that politics is only for the educated and wealth. Similar is the case of low education in Matatirtha. However, lack of education alone cannot be said to account for their non-understanding because local Dalit political activists, albeit very few, in both areas, although they had school education below SLC, had nuanced understanding of federalism and other related issue. Neither age, nor occupation, nor religion was found to have any effect on the opinion about federalism. Dalits do not have time and resources to be involved in politics because their survival by day-to-day labor is their major priority.

Identity-based Federalism

The lack of understanding on the issue of federalism, however, does not mean that they have no opinion about it. With little elaboration on the issue of federalism—especially that in a federal structure there will be multiple provinces according to identity, ethnicity, and region—they began to express their views. For the common people (that is, excluding political activists and local political leaders) federalism means ethnicity-based federalism along with Madhesi region-based federalism.

At both sites, about half of the Dalits interviewed did not agree with identity-based federalism. The possibility, and even inevitability, of loss of harmony, ethnic conflict, violence, and civil war were reported as the main reasons for their dislike of ethnic states. That Madhesis would block the flow of goods from India was a concern for two Dalits in Churiyamai and three in Matatirtha. This finding corresponds with the finding of Hachhethu (2008) that Dalits of both Hill and Madhesi groups were in favor of the unitary state. About half of the Dalit interviewed said that they did not know, care, or understand about identity-based federalism. They were uninterested or uninformed about the issue, as were they about the issue of federalism itself.

Few Dalits in both areas, however, actively supported the identity- or ethnic-based federalism. In Churiyamai, those were the ones who had been settling in the area for a long time and had intimate relationships with the Tamangs. The tailor with his shop adjacent to the Churiyamai VDC office passionately expressed his resistance to domination of Bahun-Chhetris on other groups in Nepal: “Tamangs should also be ministers, why only Bahun-Chhetris?” In Matatirtha, those who supported ethnic-based federalism were all local Maoist leaders or supporters and explained their support in terms of the right of government each ethnic or social group by themselves.

In opposition to and as an alternative to identity-based at the national level is territorial-based federalism. However, only one Dalit in each research area emphatically supported territory-based federalism against identity-based federalism. There were few voices which said that they were against federalism and supported a unitary state, but not emphatically. The lack of concern or non-understanding on this issue obviously reflects the lack of understanding or concern on the discourse of state restructuring itself.

Tamsaling and Newar province

A concern for Dalits related to the issue of identity-based federalism was the possible consequence on Dalits if Makwanpur district, in which Churiyamai lies, were to fall under Tamsaling province, and the Kathmandu Valley, in which Matatirtha lies, were to be a Newar province in the proposed new constitution.

One third of total 33 Dalits interviewed in Churiyamai and one fourth of total 24 Dalits interviewed in Matatirtha were fearful that they would be oppressed or excluded by the dominant group, Tamangs in the former and Newars in the latter. Their fear provides some clue on the caste-ethnic relations in both sites. In Churiyamai, Dalits are interspersed in the settlement of Tamangs and have direct relationship with them. The practice of untouchability by Tamangs is virtually nonexistent currently, and Dalits responded that there were no high-caste Hindus, that is, Bahun-Chhetris, near the area and so there is no issue of discrimination by them. However, Dalits have somewhat strained relationship with Tamangs and fear Tamangs not because of untouchability relationship but because many Dalits there are landless squatters or migrants and are often poor.

Similar is the case in Matatirtha, where one-fourth of the Dalits said that they would be oppressed if Newars got Newar province, which would include Matatirtha. However, the lesser proportion than that in Churiyamai is explained by the fact that Dalits there are not immediately surrounded by Newars but by Bahuns and Chhetris. Moreover, Dalits there are even now facing untouchability and other forms of discrimination from high castes, as discussed above, and Newars are perceived as not to be discriminating.

Dalits were acutely aware of their minority status not just in the respective areas but also over the whole country. So, some showed concern that they might need to relocate or would be expelled from their residential area by the dominant groups. About one fourth of Dalits in Churiyamai and more than half of Dalits in Matatirtha replied that there would be no negative effect or problem for them by living under Tamsaling and Newar province. Again, those who held such view are those who had intimate relationship with the Tamangs and Newars and because they perceived that Tamangs and Newars are non-discriminating.

Dalit Province

The main objective of the research was to assess the understanding of the issue of demand of Dalit province by Dalit leaders. Dalit leaders and rights activists have been divided on whether Dalits need a separate province at all.

Slightly less than half (15 out of 33) of the Dalits in Churiyamai and one fourth (6 out of 24) in Matatirtha had not heard about Dalit province. This can be explained mainly in terms of their lack of education and political activism. Those who said that they had heard about it could not elaborate it,

which is understandable given the complexity of the process and models of restructuring the state along federal lines, even for political leaders and scholars.

On the issue of whether a Dalit province is needed, the invariable answer of every Dalit, men and women, young or old, in both areas, except the most politically informed and educated ones, was that if all other groups needed their own provinces, then why not for Dalits. Moreover, no Dalit interviewed said explicitly that it was absolutely required.

Only 3 out of 33 in Churiyamai and 3 out of 24 in Matatirtha thought that a Dalit province would benefit them. One Dalit hoped that they would be “relieved from oppression” and there would be “hope of development.” A second one, a woman, thought that even if it might have no immediate benefit, it would be good for the coming generation, while the third one simply stated that they would be able to put their concerns to the authorities. In Matatirtha, however, those who cited benefit could not elaborate on it but simply said that it would be better for them, that there will be unity among Dalits, and that they would be proud if they got one.

Many Dalits replied that there might not be any benefits for Dalits even with such a province. No Dalit could tell exactly where such a Dalit province would be. However, one Dalit activist in Churiyamai alluded to Karnali as a possible Dalit province. This is one of the reasons why they do not think a Dalit province would be beneficial, because it would be in another place, far away. Some Dalits mentioned that having rights in the major thing rather than owning a province.

On the issue of non-territorial province, no Dalit in Churiyamai had heard about it. Even the local Dalit leader in Churiyamai, the chair of VDC Dalit Coordination Committee, showed unawareness on this issue, a finding which surprised me as it was much hyped in the State Restructuring High Commission Report 2012. In Matatirtha, only the school teacher and local leader showed understanding of it, that both territorial and non-territorial province for Dalit is related to the issue of Dalit identity rather than just rights and privileges.

Proportional Representation/ Special Rights

Alternative and complementary to the issue of federalism is the issue of proportion representation and special rights for minority groups in all apparatus of the state in Nepal, including Dalits. There is general agreement on all Nepalese people that Dalits are the most underprivileged group in Nepal (Hachhethu 2008), including Dalits in both research sites. National Dalit leaders disagree on whether proportional representation with additional quotas on top of the ones allocated according to proportion of population and special rights and privileges for Dalits itself is enough, or Dalits need them along with their own Dalit province, either territorial or non-territorial (Vishokarma et al. 2012).

In the current research, it was found, not surprisingly, that almost all Dalits had not heard about it. However, one educated Dalit in Matatirtha responded that all people should have equal rights, and that although Dalit leaders may demand rights more than others, Dalits will not get it. Most of them said that they were enough. This suggests that the issue of special rights and more quotas than others are not the concerns of common Dalits; rather, they just want equality where they are not discriminated, and oppressed, or excluded.

Government Benefits/Privileges

Dalits are the most underprivileged group in Nepal, and special provisions for socio-economic benefits and opportunities have been promised by political leaders in all political movement in Nepal. The success of movements then can be assessed by assessing the extent to which Dalits have benefited from the state. One of the objectives of the research was to assess the availability and use of government provisions for Dalits from 1990 to the present.

Privileges for Dalits in Nepal currently include (1) the reduced eligibility age threshold for receiving old age pension of Rs. 500 per month from from 75 years to 60 years for Dalits since 2008; and (2) nutrition allowance for Dalit children up to age 5 at Rs. 200 per month. There is mandatory budget allocation at 15% for underprivileged groups including Dalits, senior citizens, Muslims, etc. For the purpose of the study, such privileges were analyzed according to awareness of the programs, benefits received, sufficiency of or satisfaction with the amount, and problems with getting the benefits.

Benefits and Privileges in Churiyamai

Budget for Dalits in VDC

In Churiyamai, all Dalits knew that there is budget allocation for Dalits in the VDC, and many Dalits knew it to be about Rs. 60,000 some years ago, which has usually been the case for some years, according to the VDC office. The awareness of this budget allocation is because all Dalits (about 180 households in the whole VDC) are summoned for a meeting when budget is allocated and are informed about it.

Some years ago there was a “Forge Improvement Program” of distribution of equipments for Dalits involved in traditional occupations—blowing machines for Vishokarmas and sewing machines for Pariyars, with budget provided by district development office. One khukuri factory got Rs. 30,000 and another got Rs. 20,000 for bone cleaning machine. This was the program that most Dalits talked about. Also there was distribution of goats and other animals some years back. Unfortunately, most of those who got goats said that the goats died sooner or later, along with the original ones they had. As one woman put it: “Once I received a goat. I had six of my own. Due to that one, my all six goats died. Maybe they were brought from the hills. Maybe due to disease; maybe the water mixed.”

All Dalits interviewed were aware of such support programs. Many Dalits wanted such benefits but could not get it. However, there are many Dalits who have abandoned their traditional occupations and obviously would not benefit from it. One woman remarked: "Forge was to be distributed. My husband said he would not do that work. I sold the machine for Rs. 400 to a scavenger. No one wanted to pay for the sickle and other utensils we made, always saying they would pay later. Rather, with other work we can earn money."

There was widespread discontent over the budget allocation as well as skepticism and blaming of the administration and local leaders. Many Dalits believed that money comes from government and NGOs and quotas for Dalits but they are appropriated by leaders. One man said: "They give one or two goats to very poor Dalits and keep the rest of money for themselves." Responding to such opinions, Krishna, the leader, he lamented: "Sometimes I wish to get freedom from this place. I spend days and nights meeting and calling the government officials for the budget. Sometimes I spend money from my own pocket. I do all this from my heart, thinking that Dalits may get the benefits and privileges allocated for them by the government. Even after the task committee has decided on which households to provide the budget, we visit the whole area to check it again. Villagers do not know that money is also spent on contingencies."

Many Dalits have this kind of discontent because they are all called to the VDC office when the budget comes and are informed about the amount and allocation of the budget, but they do not get it. The Dalits go through a training program, where they are taught on Dalit rights, legal proceedings against untouchability, women's rights, and among others. At the end, they are also provided with Rs. 150 to 200 as allowance for that day's program. Many Dalits interpreted that they are provided with this small sum of this money and the rest is "eaten" by the Dalit leaders and VDC officials, and allocated to their near and dear ones. One Dalit man told me: "They call us for meeting, there will be some lecture, this much money expended on this. We do not know where the money goes. They give a glass of tea and one packet of biscuit." Krishna, the leader, informed me that maybe the Dalits were not aware that the program was on a yearly rotation basis for each VDC of the district, and that year Churiyamai received it. Moreover, there have been no NGOs in that area for the last four years to help the poor Dalits, and there have been no quotas or reservation from the government.

Education

Free education in school has been considered as a major privilege for Dalits. However, there were some discontents about the student allowance provided by the government to the school children. Some say it is Rs. 200 per month, another one Rs. 500, and another one Rs. 800, and that they are not getting it now. One Dalit woman in Mujurdhap complained: "At school, if we stay silent, then they take the fee. When last year I did not say anything, they

took fee for admission. Next time when I approached that Dalits need not pay free, they said, “Oh” and did not ask for it.”

When I sought clarification on the issue, Krishna informed me that children used to receive Rs. 250 per year as allowance but the admission fee used to be Rs. 1,000 in the Jana Jagriti School in the VDC. Due to this discrepancy and difficulty, they made an agreement with the school for five years that the school would receive the 250 rupees from each child and instead would waive the admission fee of Rs. 1,000. He also informed me that education is free up to 12th grade.

Social Security Benefits

All Dalits in Churiyamai were aware of the social security benefits for Dalits, if directed applicable to them: old age pension of Rs. 500 per month for Dalits from age 60, and nutrition allowance for Dalit children up to age 5 at Rs. 200 per month. There were few discontents on the receipt of amount and timing of receipt. This, according to Krishan, was due to the delay in receiving budget from the government.

About the various social security benefits and budgets, all of the Dalits complained that they were not enough. However meager, Dalits seemed to take notice of it and be concerned about it. For instance, a former worker in the now-closed Hattichhap Shoe Factory said: “In the past, small children were given 250-300 yearly. Not enough but received thinking why should I not receive it?”

Some Dalits equated the meager benefits they were provided to “selling the Dalit name” to the donors and considered it as an insult. For instance, one very vocal woman in Damar area related to me what she told the schoolteacher about the allowance of Rs. 200 for her child: “They give 200 per year for a student in grade two. I told the teacher that with the money given by you I did not even get a liter of oil.”

A notable part on the discussion of social security and other benefits in Churiyamai was that some women compared the benefits they are receiving there with benefits they used to receive in their maternal homes. One woman related: “In Namtar VDC, my maternal house, we got a goat. After it gives birth, we need to return it. My father gets Rs. 6,000 as Dalits monthly. For children, allowance comes there, and I got to get it, Rs. 500 in six months. Education is free in school. Only admission fee needs to be paid. Money meant for Dalits is distributed to all students: Rs. 1,700 for one Dalit student in Namtar. Here only daughter, not son, gets it. In Namtar, both get it.”

Such differences in benefits provided to Dalits in different parts of the district and different parts of Nepal can be explained by the fact that NGOs are often the service providers and funders at the rural villages than the government, and by the acknowledgement by the Dalit leader Krishna that

there have been no NGO activity supporting Dalits in the VDC for the last five years.

Benefits and Privileges in Matatirtha

Budget for Dalits

In Matatirtha, only the local Dalit leaders knew that there is budget allocation for Dalits. One local political activist related that there was some 15-20% budget for Dalits at the VDC, but was not sure about the actual percentage. A few of them said that when once or twice they had gone to the VDC office, and they were told that it had already been allocated somewhere. This non-concern was attributed, by the two local Dalit leaders, to the general lack of interest in issues of governance and politics of Dalits in the area.

In Matatirtha, in contrast to Churiyamai, only one woman mentioned that she had received some goats in the past but they were provided by the women's group.

Education

Nearly all Dalits in Matatirtha knew that there is free education for Dalits in schools except one man, who thought that it was only up to grade five. Five of the respondents had their children in private schools. All Dalits said that the quality of education in the nearby school, where most Dalit students study, was satisfactory. Only one respondent, a woman, said that her child received about 300 to 400 rupees yearly from the school. However, there was a perception that the teachers and administrators there "eat" the donation and financial assistance that come to the government school in their village. This can be attributed to their general dislike of the management of the school, which according to them was dominated by the Bahuns-Chhetris. Some college students are studying in free scholarship, and many parents say that they tried, many unsuccessfully, to get their children admitted in reputed private colleges in Kathmandu through Dalit quota.

Social Security Benefits

Dalits seemed to know less or were concerned less about the benefits provided by the government. Elders who were receiving the old age pension benefit from the government knew that for Dalits such social security was provided at age 60 rather than at age 75 for non-Dalits, but other people generally did not know about it. Similarly, those who had small children were aware of the nutrition benefit of Rs. 200 per month for children up to age 5. One third (8 out of 24) of the respondents did not know that it was given at age 60 for Dalits. One woman related to me that an elderly who had gone for old age pension at age 60 was refused and was told that it would be given only at 65. Half of the respondents knew about the nutrition allowance for Dalit children up to age 5. An educated girl aged 22, however, thought that it was provided for all.

In summary, the obvious lack of interest in budget allocated for the VDC, along with lack of knowledge in various benefits among the Dalits in Matatirtha, can be attributed to the general lack of awareness among Dalits of different social security provisions all over Nepal, as documented by the survey on “Assessment of Social Security Allowance in Nepal 2012.” Moreover, the historical domination of the VDC office by the Bahuns-Chhetris and their strained relationship, complemented with their general dislike of them, may have contributed to the disinterest.

Aspirations in the New Constitution

A major objective of the research was to gauge the aspirations of common Dalits in the new constitution. Dalits are the most oppressed and underprivileged group in Nepal, and they are the ones to whom were given the most promises by the leaders, be it during and after the 1990 democratic movement, during Maoist insurgency, or in the new constitution to be made by the CA. Although the CA had already dissolved when the research was conducted, a new CA, let us hope, would be formed in the near future and people aspired to it.

The study showed that most Dalits could not explicitly say about, or were not interested in, the provisions that the new constitution would have for them. They mentioned mainly two reasons for this. On the one hand, there was a perception that successive political movements did not affect their lives economically, thus their general dislike of politics. In other words, most Dalits were preoccupied with findings ways to keep food on their table for each day rather than on having their grievances addressed by the new constitution which the uncertain CA would provide them in the distant future. On the other hand, their lack of education and political activism, if not political consciousness, may have contributed to their inability of formulate ideas in clear terms, as the Dalit activists were able to.

Those who articulated their aspirations mostly mentioned equal rights as their primary concern in the new constitution, including strict provisions against discrimination. Although untouchability was not much of a concern for them in the respective VDC, they were concerned about incidents in other parts of the country. Next in priority was relief from poverty. Almost all Dalits wanted to see the prices of essential goods come down as it was making their livelihood difficult.

Most Dalit, especially Dalit youth, were concerned about education and employment. They were acutely aware that their poverty and backwardness was due to their lack of education. All admitted that free education in government schools was a great relief for Dalits, and they considered the quality of school to be good. Dalits informed me that they were not getting jobs according to their level of education, although they considered passing SLC as an optimal and adequate level of education. One woman in Matatirtha compared access to employment between a Dalit and a Bahun-Chhetri:

“Whereas a Bahun-Chhetri boy who just passed class ten gets a job, our Dalit children who have passed 13-14 do not get job. My daughter has studied the 12th grade but cannot get a job. Education for what? Only for one’s own. Dalits have not found jobs because they have no network. They are not active in seeking it.”

A concern expressed by a few Dalits is that the policies and programs for Dalits should be implemented. Many Dalits perceived that funds and quotas meant for Dalits were being appropriated by non-Dalits, although they could not elaborate on this.

In conclusion, most Dalits are concerned with finding their daily livelihood strategies than interested in the constitution making and provisions in it for them. Echoing Hacchethu (2008:6), who found that whereas elites are more concerned with restructuring of the Nepali state common people are more concerned with peace, political stability, and economic development, it can be inferred from the research that Dalit people are more concerned about their poverty and sustaining livelihood rather than federalism, Dalit province, new constitution.

Conclusion

The main objectives of the research had been to inquire about understandings of federalism and relevance of a Dalit province by common Dalit people and about their aspirations of common Dalit people in the New Constitution. Several salient points can be drawn from the study.

First, there has been found to be a big gap between the priority of common Dalits and their leaders, where Dalit leaders are interested in state restructuring, Dalit province, and securing Dalit rights in the constitution and state apparatus while common Dalits are more concerned about their poverty and sustaining livelihood rather than federalism. Ordinary Dalits are preoccupied with findings ways to keep food on their table than on getting a rightful, greater piece of pie of the institutions of the state. Moreover, from the meager benefits received by Dalits so far by the state, and the charge that highest Dalit leaders are the ones who benefits from such said quotas and reservations, it can be concluded that the issue of Dalit province has been raised only for the benefit of few Dalit leaders who would rise to power to enjoy posts in such provinces.

Second, about the role of education in understanding the political issues including federalism, reservation, proportional representation, and special rights, most uneducated people said that they would have known if they were educated. Moreover, due to lack of education they did not understand the news and opinions even if they watched TV or listened to the radio. Education, along with activism, is the major strategy to involve Dalits in making Dalit active supporters of beneficiaries of the new constitution making progress. Age occupation, religion, experience of discrimination, caste, media exposure, and poverty had negligible role in it.

Third, experience of untouchability should be analyzed not in a monolithic way as pervasive in all groups and parts of Nepal and that Dalits are equally oppressed by all groups in Nepal. Rather, it should be studied in the context of the relationship with their surrounding ethnic groups. Viewed in this way, it is clear that Dalits are much less oppressed by ethnic groups, such as Tamang in Churiyamai, on the basis of their caste, than by Brahmans and Chhetris in the suburb of the capital city of Kathmandu.

Finally, Dalits in both the VDCs in general oppose ethnic- or identity-based federalism. This opposition raises the question of why Dalits, common Dalits in this case, oppose federalism, especially identity-based federalism. This can be seen as a great challenge for proposed state restructuring and identity-based federalism in Nepal, especially for Janajatis and Madhesis. One line of argument is that Dalits share the same language, religion, culture, settlement pattern (scatteredness), and even caste hierarchy (although Dalits are the bottommost or even outside of it) with Brahmans and Chhetris. Moreover, some Dalit leaders (e.g., Ahuti 2010) prefer a model of Dalit identity in which Dalits will sooner or later “dissolve” or “intermix” with their respective ethnic groups. So, it may seem that it comes as no surprise that they do not feel the necessity or urgency of federalism, even less an identity-based federalism. However, I think this line of thinking misses the ground reality of Dalits in contrast to Bahun-Chhetris. Dalits and Bahuns-Chhetris have their educational, economic, and political conditions poles apart. I found that those Dalits, albeit few, who are politically active and are well informed of the current political situation and demands of Janajatis and Madhesis understood and supported identity-based federalism. So, based on my study, the cause of opposition to identity-based federalism by Dalits may not lie in their similar or same Khas caste identity but in the unawareness and lack of political consciousness and activism due to lack of education on the part of Dalits, including on the issue of state restructuring and the need of federalism.

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