

## Dalits in Governance

Dev Raj Dahal, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The system of Dalits in South Asian nations has historical roots. Caste culture and religion, as dominant ideologies, tended to legitimize the subordination of Dalits into social hierarchy and social immobility. The cost of their exclusion from key structures of governance has neither been adequately documented nor have the impacts of the reform measures of the past on their lives been brought under critical scrutiny for the legislation of basic change.

### Vision

The recent Reform Agendas articulated by the government, opposition forces and civil society of Nepal aim to rectify the historical disequilibrium of state- society relations and redress the plight of Dalits. These reformist goals can be achievable if political consensus on the reformist agendas conforms the social interests of people. Only in democracy, each individual irrespective of caste, class and gender distinction can deliberate and decide political matters of general concern. The historical and the existential experience of Dalits can be expected to unify them for collective action and seek the achievement of human development—liberation, entitlement, equal opportunities and equal outcome. Suffering of Dalits can be overcome by an educational process of critical self-learning and self-transcendence by themselves.

### Basic Questions

Why the application of reason, science and democracy could not emancipate the life of Dalits in Nepal? Are unwritten social values sacred and above the political conception of equal citizenship defined in the Constitution? If human knowledge, needs and constraints are socially constructed, how democratic politics can help to satisfy the needs of Dalits and remove the barriers on the way to their empowerment? How are Nepal's international human rights commitments, constitutional vision of creating a just society and the principles of subsidiarity inherent in Local Self-Governance Act are translated into the idea of Dalit empowerment?

These questions are intrinsically related to structure of governance in Nepal. As governance concerns with legislating, maintaining, enforcing and evaluating rules and resolving latent and structural conflicts, its effectiveness lies in eliminating all forms of racial and social discrimination and securing equal justice to all the citizens. A genuine solution to the denial of Dalits from the superstructures of governance lies in making political power in Nepal proportional to its representativeness of the social diversity and social identities.

Democracy evokes the desires of every citizen to have greater say in local and national affairs and enables them to seek to apply knowledge and skills to control over the institution of governance by means of political interest, participation and representation. Consistency between development policies and development programs is needed to maintain a balance between the political integration and social integration of all subsidiary identities including Dalits.

### Skewed Development

The general rationalization about the allocation of public resources indicates that money has been spent more on advocacy than improving the livelihoods of Dalits. The official policies also

indicate that there is a lack of coherence among District Development Committee (DDC) plan, Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). That the development performance of the governance below the target indicates an asymmetry between the public order and social justice. Another problem appears in effective monitoring, accountability and transparency of development outlays.

But, the system of monitoring of the projects for Dalits in Nepal is very weak. Devolution of power to the people, granting them ownership in projects and making them accountable have also remained as challenging tasks. These indicators are nevertheless keys to empowerment. Sovereignty of people means political power should spring from bottom-up. Evidently, Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Ward assemblies genuinely represent the social mosaic of the nation. But, at the District Development Committees (DDCs), parliament and other institutional resources of the state representation of Dalits and marginalized remains highly skewed. Why is this so?

First, political power still operates under trickle-down formula. Second, there is less social control of people over the political leadership despite periodic elections. Third, the knowledge competence through which societies develop is also monopolized by those in power and, therefore, knowledge is not utilized to solve the problem of majority of population including Dalits. Lack of requisite consciousness among the bulk of Dalit population has lent them to accept a condition of fatalism where past determines their future. The conscious Dalit elites, however, have begun a process of contestation of the basic values and institutional mechanism of governance and contributed to a sort of reformist social movements steering towards substantive social transformation.

### **Problems of Collective Action**

Dalits of Nepal face the problem of organizing themselves into a solidarity group for collective action. Their ability to demand and obtain a voice and visibility in the decision-making process largely depends on the participatory practical knowledge for re-socialization and collective action. If the allocation of national budget mirrors the political weight of powerful constituencies cannot Dalits constitute a potent political force and influence the allocation pattern? Obviously, they can, if diverse organizations of Dalits can forge a coalition, get support from non-Dalit sympathizers and effect collective action.

The collective identity of Dalits does not imply the homogeneity of their condition, ideas and orientations and effective communication among them. Their interests are uneven, layered and heterogeneous which has posed a problem in collective action. How can they produce desired change when their movements are buffeted by organizational fragmentation, rivalry and multiple orientations? The opportunities created for their interest mediation are also uneven. Association of laws with the urban, corporate and privileged interests and non-actionable and non-justiceable character of international human rights instruments, manifest a yawning gap between ideals and practice of Nepalese policy making. In such a context, the ability of Dalits to develop their inherent ability to acquire power through their own efforts and develop access to and participation in the state, political parties, economic institutions and all the intermediary associations called civil society is central to raise their participation in governance and making it just and democratic.

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