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Int'l conference to redress Dalit woes

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KATHMANDU, JUN 20 -

A three-day international conference on dynamics of caste, identity and inclusion of Dalits commenced here on Sunday.

Organised by Samata Foundation Nepal, the meet has been attended by experts from SAARC countries to discuss the state of Dalits in the country and measures that should be taken to ensure their representation in the mainstream. Lawmakers Ramesh Lekhak, Pradip Gyawali, Bishwa Bhakta Dulal

and Jawaharlal Nehru University Professor Sukhadeo Thorat addressed the conference on the first day. "The government should ensure constitutional, legal, political, economic and social rights to eliminate the prevalent group discrimination in the Nepali society," said Prof. Thorat.

Dalit rights defenders said the underprivileged groups' rights were in jeopardy due to the delay in the constitution writing process and their inability to be organised as a single force.

"The delay in constitution writing has worried Dalits whether their rights will be guaranteed," Maoist lawmaker Dulal said.

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Monday, Jul 19, 2010

Oped»

Voices from the powwow

ERISHA SUWAL

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JUN 29 -

Subaltern groups like Dalits can challenge the hegemonic discourse of dominant academia," Prof. Mahendra Lavoti said. The International Dalit Conference titled "Dynamics of Caste, Identity and Inclusion of Dalits" held from June 20-22 was the first step towards doing exactly that.

Samata Foundation, a think-tank dedicated to Dalit issues, brought together, for the first time in Nepali history, academics, activists, politicians, lawyers, NGO workers and students from Nepal. Academics and activists from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the US were also present. The various topics discussed included Dalit in South Asia, Human Rights and Dignity, Identity and Dalit Politics, Globalisation and Dalit Social Movement, Development Paradox, and Constitution Building and Peace Process. The range of topics discussed raised many important questions such as defining Dalit identity, socio-economic empowerment, political inclusion and regaining dignity.

Among all the pressing questions, Dalit identity emerged as the most urgent one. After about 60 years of struggle, Nepal's Dalit movement faces the challenge of redefining Dalit identity. While the Dalit movement fights for social inclusion, questions on whether the movement itself is inclusive of all the subgroups within the Dalit communities were raised. Amid debates on federalism and heightened sensitivity to diverse identities, the Dalit community needs to recognise the heterogeneity within itself when creating a common identity for a united movement. There are Pahadi Dalits, Madhesi Dalits, women Dalits and Dalits within Dalits. Furthermore, what the term Dalit means in Sri Lanka is not the same as what it means in Nepal. This heterogeneity and fluidity of Dalit identity dominated the three-day conference to a large extent.

Ahuti, a Dalit CA member, said that party-led factionalism was the primary weakening factor for the Dalit movement. He said this on the first day of the conference. But by the third day, it became evident that the Dalit movement was divided for a more fundamental reason—Dalit identity. From day one, at almost every question and answer session, Madhesi Dalit activists, women Dalits or Dalit activists from the Far Western Region raised their hands to either ask about their representation in the movement or to claim that they were more oppressed than Pahadi Dalits.

Ram Lakhan Das of Sarlahi, president of the Madhes Dalit Adhikaar Samiti, said, "The struggle is more difficult for Madhesi Dalits. First, we are Madhesi, and on top of that, we are Dalits." His friend Shiv Kumar Mahara of the Madhesi Dalit Morcha, Siraha, said, "Madhesi Dalits and Pahadi Dalits are separate although they are both Dalits. The Dalit movement should, of course, be united; but the two identities should be understood as separate. They should work in parallel."

Prof. S.K. Thorat, who teaches economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, conceptualised Dalit identity as those who have been historically deprived of their rights and discriminated against for their caste or rather, for not having one. But Dalits have been discriminated against and oppressed for thousands of years. Their identity has evolved with time and varies with place.

Therefore, a greater priority would be to build a common Dalit identity rather than mitigate party-led factionalism. To build a common Dalit identity, it needs to be redefined. This redefinition is imperative if Dalits, who compose about 13 percent of Nepal's population, want to have a stronger influence in the constitution writing and nation building process. If the conference highlighted the challenge of building a common identity, it also put forward a step to be taken. All the participants agreed that more knowledge on all aspects of Dalit life needs to be produced.

Production and exchange of knowledge about all the subgroups of in the Dalit community can help in creating a common identity. Mahara said, "Madhesi Dalits don't have a history. So we don't have an identity. Our history needs to be written whether from the inside or the outside." Mahara doesn't need to have studied Foucault to recognise the importance of knowledge production. Suvash Darnall, director of the Samata Foundation, said, "Information is power in today's world."

Knowledge production will not only contribute towards building a common Dalit identity, it will also contribute to making knowledge-based or evidence-based policies on social justice for Dalits. Knowledge-based policies will, hopefully, take into account ground realities unlike, for example, the current government's policy of providing monetary compensation for inter-caste marriage. Furthermore, knowledge production will help non-Dalits understand the oppressed conditions of Dalits. Dr. Vivek Kumar, a sociologist at Jawaharlal Nehru University, said, "You don't have to burn your finger to feel the pain." He added that it was the first time that the Dalit community had been dissected at such depth at an international conference, and so events with a similar purpose should be organised more frequently.

If the Dalit community wants to mobilise itself effectively, it needs to build a common identity; and in order to build a common identity, efforts to produce subaltern knowledge, in this case, on all the subgroups within the Dalits, need to be intensified. Despite complaints that only researchers and organisers of such conferences benefit from donor funding, a conference such as this is extremely important if the Dalit movement wants to keep up with the changing landscape of Nepali politics and be better prepared for the future.

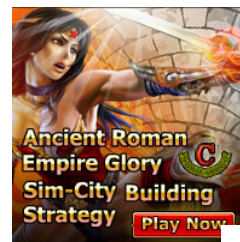
(The author is a Master's student at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs)



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► Finding Integrity

An intrinsic aspect of Nepali society and culture has remained rooted in its paralyzing acceptance of the Hindu caste/class system.

Formally institutionalized in Nepal by the Muluki Ain in 1854 by Jung Bahadur Rana, the implications of its hierarchical division of society is pertinent even today, some 60 years after the initiation of caste-based definitions.

Without doubt, under this crippling hierarchy, those who were and still remain the most ostracized, neglected and demeaned are the literal outcasts, the Dalits.

The term in itself stands contested today, with many activists and leaders claiming its direct connotations with suppression, and the continual branding of this stratum of society as impure. However, while the more recent term "former untouchables" is gaining popularity amongst intellectual and political circles, for most Nepalis, the term "Dalit" is still in currency.

The Dalits in Nepal make up about 13% of the country's population, and unlike any other caste and ethnic groups, they have historically been scattered throughout from east to west and north to south. Accounting for such a substantial chunk of the country's population, they are also the most deprived and systematically excluded group in Nepal. They are "at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy," according to Dr. Mary Cameron, professor at Florida Atlantic University in the US and a researcher on Dalit rights.

The factual truth

In terms of Dalits' access to health, education and general wellbeing, the figures are devastating. While there is much talk of the improvements of the socio-economic betterment of the community after the advent of democracy, it is clear that while narrowing, the gap between the Dalits and other castes in terms of access to resources still remains stark.

With over 50% of the Dalit community unable to read at all, "in absolute numbers of people, Dalits rank the lowest (in literacy)," adds Cameron.

From her research, it was established that they are among the few traditionally marginalized groups that actually have less than 1% or less people having attained higher education. This is, however, not to say that other groups do not suffer the brunt of a lack in education, and according to Chaitanya Mishra, professor at Tribhuvan University, the gaps in literacy between Dalits and non-Dalits is rapidly decreasing.



Nonetheless, even when it comes to health, the figures are similar. Again, more than 60% of the group between the ages of 15 and 49 years are anemic. This is in contrast to Brahmin and Newar groups whose health, though not rosy, either, is far better off with about 40% of their population suffering from anemia.

Perhaps, in this era of globalization, a more precise estimate of a group's backwardness is accounted for by wealth accumulation. But even here, according to Cameron's research, "Dalits have the highest number of people falling under the poorest quintile, i.e., most of Nepal's poor are Dalit."

Purna Nepali, a PhD candidate at Kathmandu University, suggests that poverty, lack of education, and poor health are not a "question of the physical availability of food, but ownership of food producing resources, like land." And thus, the Dalit communities have been claiming land rights in order to pull themselves out of what he calls "structural poverty." According to him, "land is a broader indicator of socio-political-economic status." His explanation is such that the social structure and stratification in Nepali society gave way to the caste system, and its hierarchy which, in turn, defined exclusion. This brought forward inequality which permeated throughout the society through existing traditional and informal institutions, such as the Haliya and Khalo. Furthermore, he looks at the injustices of historical land grant systems and the uses of the state's machinery

and apparatus to capture Dalits' land.

In general, while 21% of Dalits have no land, a whopping 77% are "agriculturally landless," according to Ahuti's (Bishwobhakta Dulal) findings in 2003. By agriculturally landless, it is meant that this group owns less than two ropanis of land. Such data and figures keep coming in, and time and again, from one survey to the next it is clear that even with the abolishment of caste discrimination in the 1990 constitution and the establishment of democracy, Dalits still bear the brunt of 240 years of systematic suppression. What is lucid is that in a country like Nepal where cultural norms and practices hold high accord, even with economic freedom, the stigmas of society have kept the Dalit community at the very bottom of the social and economic ladder. This leads one to question how and why such inequality was sustained in Nepal.

The historical legitimization of inequality

It is a fact that, overall, Nepal is a poor country in which poverty is rife. However, unlike other impoverished communities of Nepal, the case of the Dalits is "different." According to Dr. S.K. Thorat, professor of Economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, while the Dalit community "share[s] the problem of poverty with other groups, they also suffer from gross discrimination which the others do not." The argument here, being that, the Dalits are denied basic rights which other ethnicities and caste groups are not. And these denials of rights are "associated with social and cultural identity, not only economic identity."

Traditionally, the denial of rights to marginalized groups, and especially the Dalit community, has played an immense factor in the community's inability to rise economically. As it stands, "they are denied equal rights, not because they don't deserve them, but because traditionally they just didn't have these rights," explains Thorat. He argues that while many groups may be poor due to the lack of resources; the "causation" for Dalits is different. And the causation for their denial of rights "is not capitalism or feudalism, it is the caste system." And while other groups suffered from the dynamics of capitalism and feudalism, the Dalits, alongside this, also suffered from the dynamics of caste-based discrimination.

Such discrimination was legitimized in the country's Civic Code (Muluki Ain) in 1854. But on the local level, there was also cultural rooting that rendered such inequality possible. Purna Nepali examines the way in which local proverbs explained and institutionalized the power structures of the caste system. Sero khane ki phero khane (Either take land or produce) and Tariko tod bithariko githa (Powerful can but powerless cannot) are good examples of the kinds of proverbs that instilled a self-fulfilling fatefulness among the Dalit community.

What Antonio Gramsci termed as "cultural hegemony" flourished in Nepal. He argued that such cultural leadership exercised by the ruling class served as a means of domination. However, Gramsci argued that while "consciousness and commonsense," of a certain group may very well hold a different worldview, it is all too often "contradictory and fragmented."

Amar BK, a researcher on Dalit identity, looks at the Sarki (a Dalit group) community in Kaski, and how, although accepting of the Hindu social order, actually holds a contradictory set of beliefs. The myths which they hold true actually "claim equality, rejecting their low and degraded identity." For example, it is known that Bahuns do not recite the Vedas in the presence of Dalits. But, according to Sarki mythology, it is not because of their impurity but because the Bahuns stole the Vedas from the Sarkis!

There are many such myths that present a different, more equal world view for the Dalit community. However, because these myths counter with the accepted dominant view, it is as though the Dalits have two streams of consciousness – "one which is implicit in his activity, and the other, superficially explicit and verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed." Here, the former being the suppressed reasoning, and the latter being that promulgated by the ruling class.

Thus, through the means of cultural hegemony, the Dalit community in Nepal has inescapably been trapped into the gallows of poverty and exclusion. However, with the era of globalization and mass migration, a democratic means of government, the secularization of the country and the liberalization of society, a way forward for this historically marginalized community is slowly yet surely being paved.

En route to a new identity and its integrity

Constructing a new Dalit identity from within a community that has been pushed and pulled in different directions by the state, scattered throughout the country, and so divided within itself has proved itself an enormous task for the Dalits of Nepal. With many in the community preoccupied with questioning what the culture of his/her caste actually is, it has come to the realization of many activists and intellectuals that the Dalit identity first and foremost must stop being observed as a homogenous entity. This materialized in the wake of Nepal's current political crisis and in determining a suitable federal model for the country. The Dalits, although representing a big proportion of the country's population, have not been allotted a separate state under the allegations that they lack a distinct culture/language or historical/geographical location.

However, at present, there are 50 Dalit members in the Constituent Assembly, and according to Thorat, although they have not been able to act as a cohesive force within it, with the one-year extension of the CA, there is hope that they may yet pull together as a united front, and create opportunities for the community from within the nation's new constitution. While Dalit scholars and activists like Ahuti refute the notion of a separate state for Dalits as they share the culture of the dominant high castes, scholar Mahendra Lawoti has provided an alternative solution to the ethnic federalism project being floated in the political sphere today.

He argues that for Dalits, and other groups alike, the best model for a decentralized and equal power-sharing mode of federalism would be a non-territorial one. Much like the examples of Belgium or Cyprus, and to an extent the way in which the Muslims in India have right to Sharia Law, Nepal could also potentially thrive under this kind of federalism. The argument here is that such federalism would "increase poly-ethnicity and power sharing among caste groups as well."

However, there is much division in feeling towards this proposed solution. Nonetheless, what has materialized is a unified

demand for "special rights" whereby the Dalit community is demanding compensation of sorts for the past 240 years of systematic oppression and regression. Alongside this, demands for mass land reform and distribution are also high on the agenda within the Dalit activists and political community.

Having said this, the political and social subjects of Nepal's Dalit community remain fragmented, with Madhesi Dalits pushing one agenda while the hill Dalits forwarding another; and the caste system which has seeped into this outcaste community itself is proving as a barrier to their own development.

Nepal's Interim Constitution, as it stands, has made much progress for the Dalit people. It assures all citizens a "dignified life," and Dalits have finally been recognized as one of the beneficiaries of all the benefits of social justice. Also, a separate provision of rights against untouchability has been recognized. However, the Dalit community has been "treated as equal to other groups, which should not be the case," says Tek Tamrakar, a researcher on Dalit rights.

"The major decisions are made by political parties. The members do not have enough substantive power to make decisions," he adds. And thus the Dalit leadership and party leadership within various political parties, though having pushed forward the Dalit agenda significantly, has also acted as a divisive tool within the community.

But there is no doubt that the past few years have seen a more progressive Nepali polity than ever before. And for the Dalit community, if their agendas are more resolute and can find some sort of consensus under the unity-in-diversity mantra, much progress is to come for the former untouchables of Nepal.

COVER FEATURE

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