

Dalits, Discrimination and Food Industry in Nepal

The caste system

The caste system is a social division of people based on their occupation and access to power. The caste system in Nepal with its origin in Hindu philosophy has always prescribed social status based on birth. Thus, caste has been considered and practiced as a matter of birth, which cannot be changed by quality, education, intellect and social contribution.

The generation of castes is based on the **Varna** system of Hindu theology. The *Varna system* in the early period of the development of human civilization during and before *Vedic* Era of South Asia and Middle East was actually the division of labour in the society of the time. The *Varna system*, thus, is a system of four *Varnas* - *Brahmin*, *Chhetri*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*.

In the vertical division of people in traditional Hindu society, *Brahmins* are at the top as head, brain and authority of education and knowledge. Similarly, *Chhetris* are the ruling class, their major occupation under the guidance of Brahmins, designated as Soldiers, Security and hunting of wildlife. The *Vaishyas* are the producers and traders of the society representing business class and the *Shudras* as the bottom point of Hindu caste hierarchy are considered servant and workers-the toiling group of society. However, there are two sub-categories even Among Shudras-one, touchable Shudras to serve the higher three Varnas, including of course the household works and the other untouchable Shudras for outside work. Untouchable Shudras are the most discriminated group and later termed as dalits. The term 'dalit' means extremely suppressed and hence dalit refers to the most exploited socially as well as economically which exists as the lowest point of the societal pyramid.

Meaning of untouchability

The term 'untouchable' or *Achhut* has been in the Nepali discourse from a very long period of time denoting those castes of Shudras, who are not

permitted by upper castes to enter their houses, temples and other public places and to touch food or water to be used by the upper caste people. In later days mainly in last decades of 20th Century, the term dalit has been started to use intensively to replace the word '*Achhut*'. The practice of untouchability is being lesser and lesser in urban areas whereas it is still highly victimising people in rural areas.

Dalit population in Nepal

There are two broader groups of Dalits in Nepali society- the **Hill Origin** and the **Terai or Plain area Origin**. As a special category, there are Dalits as well among the Newar Community (Newar is major groups of Vaisya) community itself.

Table 1: List of Occupational Cast in Nepal

Community Name	Occupation	Location
Lohar/Kami	Iron works	Hill
Sunar	Gold works	Hill
Damai	Tailoring/music player	Hill
Sarkee	Shoe making	Hill
Chitre	Bamboo works	Hill
Chundra	Wooden pot maker	Hill
Tamata	Metal works	Western Hill
Kusle/Kulu	Musical instrument maker	Kathmandu valley
Pode	Sweeper	Kathmandu valley
Kasai	Butcher	Kathmandu valley
Chyme/Chyamkhala	Toilet cleaning	Kathmandu valley
Chamar	Shoe making	Terai
Dom	Sweeper	Terai
Dusadh	Agri and other labour	Terai
Mushahar	Agri and other labour	Terai
Dhobi	Clothes washing	Terai
Tatma	Agri labour	Terai
Khatwe	Agri labour	Terai
Satar	Agri labour	Terai
Halkhor	Toilet cleaning	Terai
Bantar	Bamboo working	Mid-West
Badi	Dancing and entertainer	Western Nepal
Gaine	Singing	Hill
Hurke/Harahuru		

As mentioned in *Table-2* given below there are 5 categories of Hill origin Dalits and 6 are from Terai Origin. It is estimated that there are 16 *Lakhs* (9% of total population) Dalit from Hill Origin and 3.5% from Terai Origin Dalits. Altogether there are 22 *Lakhs* 72 thousands Dalit population in Nepal based on Population Census-1991. It is 12.3% of the total population¹. If we project this number by 2.5% per year, the Dalit population by 2000 should be 28 *Lakhs*. Now this number can be calculated as 5 Millions of total population of 23.15 millions, 20 % of the total.

Table 2: Total population and of Dalit

	Total Population	% of total population
Hill Origin		
Kami	963,655	5.21
Damai	367,989	1.99
Sarki	276,435	1.49
Badi	7,082	0.04
Gaine	4,485	0.02
Total	1,619,435	8.75
Terai Origin		
Dhobi	76,594	0.41
Dusaad	93,242	0.50
Chamar	203,919	1.10
Khatbe	66,612	0.36
Musahar	141,980	0.77
Kanu	70,634	0.38
Total	272,416	12.27
Teli	250,732	1.36
Kalabar	162,046	0.88

Constitution and laws on Dalit

The Constitution of Kingdom of Nepal, 1990 and the Civil Code (*Muluki Ain, 2020 B.S.*) deny untouchability and ensure the social equality and right against any kinds of discrimination based on occupation, caste and other ethnic groupings of society. No other laws exist against this norm. However, in social practice, the situation is quite different and hence the appropriate implementation of laws in favour of

¹ Mentioned in a paper presented in the dalit national conference by Dr. Shiva Sharma, January 3-4, 1998

equal rights to *dalits* has always been a far cry in our society. The superstitious beliefs and still dominating outdated feudal characteristics of traditional social life have been the major obstacles in this regard.

Dalit movement and the formation of the Dalit Commission

Dalits are fighting for their rights together with various progressive movements. In early days this issue was taken up particularly left movement of the country. In 1980s Dalit caste-based peoples' organisation named *Udpidit Jati Utthan Manch* was established in order to gear up this movement. Following years there was significant momentum was foreseen. Later this *manch* was renamed as *Udpidit Jatiya Mukti Samaaz*. Particularly just after the restoration of multiparty democracy dozens of such organisations were launched. Remarkable changes were formation of 100s of NGO based on various Dalit communities mushroomed. It has resulted in enough pressures to non-dalit policy makers as well. Hence, the government has declared a high Level **National Dalit Commission** on March 19, 2002.

Formal sector food industries and involvement of dalit labour

Keeping in view, the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) conducted an indicative study in order to examine present contest of occupational discrimination in food and beverage industries. The reason to choose these industries is food like noodles, biscuits and bakery, juice and other soft drinks and dairy products is often considered by the society free should be free from Dalit.

All together 22 enterprises were taken as a sample size. The geographical coverage was from east to west and Terai to the urban hills. A set of 11 questionnaires (*see annex: 1*) was circulated to the workers and employers of the company. Table-1 shows the sample size:

Table 3: Types and number of enterprises covered by the study

Type of Enterprises	Number	Percent
Biscuit / Bakery	12	54.6
Confectionary	4	18.2
Noodles	2	9.1
Dairy Products	1	4.5
Soft drink (Juice, Coca-Cola etc)	2	9.1
Pickles	1	4.5
Total	22	100.0

Assuming that the food products are most vulnerable with regards to occupation based discrimination, 54.6% of sample size was taken from Biscuits and Bakery. Like wise 18.2% from confectionary, 9.1% each from Noodles and Soft Drinks and remaining from Dairy products and pickles.

Table 4: Proportion of Dalit Cast by types of Establishment

Type of Enterprises	Total Workers	Dalit	Percent
Biscuit / Bakery	1,029	95	9.2
Confectionary	49	-	-
Noodles	296	4	1.4
Dairy Products	195	6	3.1
Soft drink	232	13	5.6
Pickles	77	6	7.8
Total	1878	124	6.6

The number of Dalits participating in food industries widely varies. Bakery and biscuits factories are proven most progressive in this regard, where 9.2% Dalit of total number of surveyed workers is found. Confectionary has nil and pickles industries have 7.8% Dalits. Likewise, soft drinks, dairy products and noodles industries have 5.6%, 3.1% and 1.4% dalits respectively.

Table 5: Caste structure and workers

Caste	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Brahmin/ Chhetri/ Newar	1155	87.7	524	93.4	1679	89.4
Dalit caste (Hill Origin)	43	3.3	18	3.2	61	3.2
Dalit caste (Terai origin)	47	3.5	17	3.0	63	3.4
Other non- Dalit caste	73	5.5	2	0.4	75	4.0
Total	1317	100.0	561	100.0	187.8	100.0

Of the total enterprises surveyed, overwhelming number of workers (89.4%) from 'upper caste' people like Brahmin, Chhetri and Newar has found. There is more or less equal percentage of Terai and Hill origin dalits in such industries 3.4% and 3.2% respectively.

Dalits were found nil in Confectionary industry. However, high incidents of Dalit were found in Biscuits/Bakery (76%). Low numbers of dalit has been found in noodles and dairy products. A detail is given below in the Table: 6

Table 6: Dalit caste by Establishments

Type of Enterprises	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Biscuit / Bakery	67	75.3	28	80.0	95	76.6
Confectionary	-	-	-	-	-	-
Noodles	3	3.4	1	2.9	4	3.2
Dairy Products	6	6.7	-	-	6	4.8
Soft drink (Juice, Coca-Cola etc.)	9	10.0	4	11.4	13	10.5
Pickles	4	4.5	2	5.7	6	4.8
Total	89	100.0	35	100.0	124	100.0

Percentage of female dalit is high in comparison with male. However female ratio in Musahar/ Dusadh and other dalit cast is just reverse.

Table 7: Proportion of Dalit by caste and sex

Caste	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Damai	14	15.7	8	22.9	22	17.7
Kami	18	20.2	9	25.7	27	21.8
Sarki	2	2.2	1	2.9	3	2.4
Pode/ Chyame	7	7.9	3	8.6	10	8.1
Chamar/ Dum	7	7.9	5	14.3	12	9.7
Musahar/ Dusadh	24	27.0	5	14.3	29	23.4
Other Dalit- caste	17	19.1	4	11.4	21	16.9
Total	89	100.0	35	100.0	124	100.0

There are few types of work that has been offered to dalit to perform. Cleaning, packaging, machine operator, porter types of job are assigned jobs to them. In bakery and biscuits, generally they are denied working in such a section where flour and water is mixed and trained.

Table 8: Involvement of dalits by types of work

Type of work	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Clearing	9	10	7	20.0	16	12.9
Packaging	38	42.7	20	57.1	58	46.8
Operator	21	23.6	4	11.4	25	20.2
Transport	8	9.0	-	-	8	6.5
Other	13	14.6	4	11.4	17	13.7
Total	89	100.0	35	100.0	124	100.0

Following table shows dalits by place of origin.

Table 9: Dalit workers by place of Origin

Place of origin	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Local	48	53.9	20	57.1	68	54.8
Other place within same district	27	30.3	14	40.0	41	33.1
Other districts	14	15.7	1	2.9	15	12.1
Total	89	100.0	35	100.0	129	100.0

Reason, recommendation and conclusion

Above tables show, there is less involvement of dalits in Nepali food industry. During our study a set of question was asked to dig out the reasons. Out of the selected 22 establishments 59% have provided employment to dalit any way.

In order to examine social changes, the survey team asked- when they started to work. Among the total Dalit workers, 77% were working prior to restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990. Whereas 15% dalits started their work within a period of 1990-2000. Only 8% of them have had their job very recently.

However, the study shows 41% enterprises are preventing dalit work in their establishments. Of the total respondents, 66.7% said the reason is social practice of **untouchability**. 33.3% said dalit themselves are not interested work in the food industry.

Discrimination... Discrimination... Discrimination

In a biscuit factory of the tourism city of Pokhara Nepal, a biog group of women workers are working. The GEFONT team reached in the factory to identify gender issues at work places. Among the questionnaires, one was related to 'menstruation leave'. 'Does your factory ever offer this leave to women workers?' The answer was in the affirmative. They were provided a four-day menstruation leave without pay. If women touch any food items during their periods, they will be 'unholy', the owner feels. "Women are being treated as dalit during that period," remark women workers.

(GEFONT submission to the Anti-slavery International, UK-May 21, 2002;
Prepared by Rudra Gautam, Umesb Upadhyaya and Bishnu Rimal)