

CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION AT SCHOOL: A CRITICAL  
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF JANAKPUR, NEPAL

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## AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Roshan Kumar Jha* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in Development Studies*, presented on *28 January 2026*, entitled *Caste-Based Discrimination at School: A Critical Ethnographic Study of Janakpur, Nepal*.

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This research is conducted in a semi-urban area of Janakpurdham Sub-Metropolitan City. It examines three research question that is how caste-based discrimination manifests in everyday school life, how discrimination is reproduced through the practices and behaviors of teachers, the School Management Committee (SMC), and the school as an institution, and how Dalit students respond to such experiences. The research is based on an ethnographic approach, and critical paradigm has been applied to challenge the existing inequality. The researcher spent one and a half months in the field, engaging closely with students, teachers and SMC. Different approaches were taken for the data collection that includes observation, informal conversations, in-depth interviews, and regular interaction with students. The perspective of teachers and school management committee was also included while focusing on students' lived experiences.

The study has tried to capture routine practices, daily interactions, and institutional behaviors that shape caste-based discrimination. The findings show that factors like silence, normalization and denial of caste-related issues allow discrimination to continue. In many cases, discrimination is not overt or direct but appears through everyday activities, and informal behaviors. Therefore, the study argues that caste-based discrimination persists not only through visible practices but also through hidden curriculum. The research also contributes to a deeper

understanding of how schools can unintentionally reproduce social inequality and emphasizes the need for more conscious and inclusive educational practices.



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28 January 2026

## शोधसार

विकास शिक्षामा दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर उपाधिका लागि रोशन कुमार झाको शोधप्रबन्धको शिर्षक "विद्यालयमा जातीय आधारमा हुने विभेद: जनकपुर नेपालको एक समालोचनात्मक इन्थोग्राफिक अध्ययन" १४ माघ २०८२ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो ।

.....  
उप. प्रा. लिना गुरुङ, पीएचडी  
शोध निर्देशक

यो अनुसन्धान जनकपुरधाम उपमहानगरपालिकाको एक अर्धशहरी क्षेत्रमा सञ्चालन गरिएको हो। यस अध्ययनले तीनवटा मुख्य प्रश्नहरू: विद्यालयको दैनिक जीवनमा जातीय विभेद कसरी प्रकट हुन्छ, शिक्षकहरू, विद्यालय व्यवस्थापन समिति तथा संस्थागत अभ्यास र व्यवहारमार्फत यस्तो विभेद कसरी पुनःउत्पादन हुन्छ, र दलित विद्यार्थीहरूले यस्ता अनुभवप्रति कसरी प्रतिक्रिया जनाउँछन्, को अनुसन्धान गरेको छ । यस अनुसन्धान इन्थोग्राफिक पद्धतिमा आधारित छ र विद्यमान असमानतालाई चुनौती दिन समालोचनात्मक दृष्टिकोण (critical paradigm) अवलम्बन गरिएको छ। अनुसन्धानकर्ताले करिब डेढ महिना सोही क्षेत्रमै बिताउँदै विद्यार्थी, शिक्षक तथा विद्यालय व्यवस्थापन समिति सँग घनिष्ठ अन्तर्क्रिया गरेका छन्। तथ्याङ्क संकलनका लागि अवलोकन, अनौपचारिक संवाद, गहिरा अन्तर्वार्ता, तथा विद्यार्थीहरूसँग नियमित अन्तर्क्रिया जस्ता विभिन्न विधिहरू प्रयोग गरिएका छन्।

यस अध्ययनले जातीय विभेदलाई आकार दिने नियमित अभ्यास, दैनिक अन्तर्क्रिया तथा संस्थागत व्यवहारहरूलाई समेट्ने प्रयास गरेको छ। यस अध्ययनबाट प्राप्त निष्कर्षहरू अनुसार मौनता, सामान्यीकरण तथा जातीय प्रश्नहरूको अस्वीकार जस्ता पक्षहरूले विभेदलाई निरन्तरता दिन सहयोग पुऱ्याउँछन्। धेरै अवस्थामा विभेद प्रत्यक्ष वा स्पष्ट रूपमा नभई दैनिक क्रियाकलाप र अनौपचारिक व्यवहारमार्फत अभिव्यक्त हुने गरेको पाइएको छ। त्यसैले, यस अध्ययनले जातीय विभेद दृश्य अभ्यासहरूबाट मात्र नभई "अदृश्य पाठ्यक्रम" (hidden curriculum) मार्फत पनि कायम रहने तर्क प्रस्तुत गर्दछ। यस अनुसन्धानले विद्यालयहरूले अनायासै सामाजिक असमानताको पुनःउत्पादन कसरी गर्न सक्छन् भन्ने विषयमा गहिरो समझ प्रदान गर्नुका साथै थप सचेत र समावेशी शैक्षिक अभ्यासहरूको आवश्यकता औँल्याएको छ।



.....  
रोशन कुमार झा  
उपाधि उम्मेदवार

१४ माघ २०८२

This dissertation, entitled *Caste-Based Discrimination at School: A Critical Ethnographic Study of Janakpur, Nepal*, was presented by *Roshan Kumar Jha* on 28 January 2026.

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I understand that my dissertation will become a part of the permanent collection of the library of Kathmandu University. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.

  
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work, and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.



.....

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28 January 2026

## DEDICATION

To my daughters; Shreenika Shree and Shanvika Shree

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## ABBREVIATIONS

A3	ISO standard paper size (297 × 420 mm)
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DDC	District Development Committee
DNF	Dalit NGO Federation
DoE	Department of Education
FM	Frequency Modulation
Gen Z	Generation Z
HMG	His Majesty's Government
KUSOED	Kathmandu University School of Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MPhil	Master of Philosophy
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
ND	Non-Dalit
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PTA	Parent–Teacher Association
RJD	Rashtriya Janata Dal
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEE	Secondary Education Examination
SESP	School Education Sector Plan
SMC	School Management Committee
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VDC	Village Development Committee

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### **Background and Personal Motivation**

On 4 October 2018, an incident in Mahottari district was reported in which a student, Mukesh Kumar Mallick, belonging to the Dom community, was expelled by the school administration for refusing to clean the school (Thahakhabar, 2018). The Dom community is seen as being at the bottom of the Hindu caste structure, and this narrative demonstrates the persistence of caste-based discrimination in Nepali schools (Kareriya, 2011). After hearing about the incident, I reported it, as I was a reporter for a local FM radio station at the time. Although the incident made me sad, it did not surprise me, as many people familiar with Nepal's caste system have seen similar practices before.

I, too, observed such behavior when I was in primary school. Some teachers from higher castes used to refuse to drink water from Dalits or so-called lower-caste students, preferring to drink water from Brahmin or higher-caste students. Such behaviors were common because each caste is expected to perform certain duties and follow certain behavioral norms in a traditional Hindu community (Sankaran et al., 2017). Three decades have passed since my primary school days, and although many changes have occurred in Nepal, including changes in the political system, constitution, and cultural structure, incidents of caste-based discrimination are still found in different parts of the country, including schools. This has motivated me to research caste-based discrimination at school through a critical lens to see how it is manifested and sustained and how it is responded to. I wanted to deep dive into how everyday practices, interactions, and institutional behaviors shape students' lived experiences.

### **Understanding Dalit**

There are two different perspectives on the understanding of Dalit. One perspective describes the social and political identity of those who are historically marginalized and deprived of access to education, resources, and mobility (Guru, 2009; Shah, 2001). Another perspective links it with the Hindu varna system and identifies it with the Shudra. They also link it with "untouchables" and position it at the bottom of the caste hierarchy (Gellner, 2007).

Historically, Dalits are the deprived communities who have been marginalized and excluded from social, religious, and economic life. However, untouchables were further marginalized as their mobility was also restricted. Many Dalits are categorized as untouchables, but the term has a different meaning, as Dalit is more often used to refer to the political and emancipatory identity, they have adopted (Guru, 2009; Omvedt, 2017).

In the context of Nepal, Dalits have historically faced social exclusion and discrimination that have limited their access to education, economic resources, and opportunities for upward mobility (Bennett, 2005; Cameron, 1998).

In this study, the term Dalit has been used to broadly identify communities that are socially and politically identified as Dalit and have historically been marginalized.

### **Caste-Based Discrimination in Everyday School Life**

Sir H. Risley defines caste as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community (Risley, 1915).

Ketkar (1909) has defined the characteristics of a caste as membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all people so born.

The members are forbidden by inexorable social laws to marry outside the group. Each group has a special name by which it is known. Several such small aggregates are grouped together under a common name, while these larger groups are subdivisions of groups that are still larger and have independent names.

In daily school life, various forms of caste-based inequality occur. Unequal distribution of opportunities or access, silence, neglect, normalization, and similar behaviors are taken as indicators of caste-based discrimination. Such discrimination is observed in teacher–teacher, teacher–student, and student–student relationships, as well as in other school activities. This type of discrimination is often expressed through subtle behaviors and is not always overt. However, it is continuously reproduced through language, prioritization, and silence (Pincus, 1996; Sunar, 2019).

During this study, caste-based discrimination is understood not only as a legal violation, social problem, or policy issue, but also as a behavior considered normal in daily school practices that affects Dalit students (Bhattachan et al., 2009).

## **Conceptualizing Discrimination**

Why do we need education? Well, the answer could be many, but one of the striking answers I had read was from Alexis Herman, an American politician. “Education is crucial because, first of all, people need to know that discrimination still exists. It is exercised in the workplace, and we should not take that for granted (Settles et al., 2010).” This statement was made to raise awareness of the role of education in combating discrimination. So, the question remains: What happens when educational institutions themselves participate in discriminatory practices?

As per Triana et al. (2015), discrimination is the denial of individuals of equitable treatment. This is because they are associated with or are members of a particular group or association. If someone or a group gains a comparative advantage and the other group suffers a disadvantage because of their membership in socially recognized groups, that can be termed discrimination. Such discrimination can be observed in areas such as education, social status, and access to opportunities.

Discrimination is also understood as a moral issue, a comparative one. Individuals experience disadvantages because of group membership, which makes discrimination morally wrong. This understanding goes beyond earlier definitions that focused only on unequal treatment.

Discrimination can be categorized into three types: individual, institutional, and structural. Individual discrimination refers to direct actions by individuals. Institutional discrimination refers to actions and decisions by people in positions of power within institutions. Structural discrimination combines individual actions and institutional policies that are shaped by dominant groups (Pincus, 1996). This framework outlines different types of discrimination and how discriminatory practices may occur in educational settings. This helps understand discrimination at different levels and how individual action, institutional practices, and social structure interplay to reproduce and sustain discrimination.

## **Institutional and Structural Discrimination in Schools**

Discrimination can be categorized into three distinct types: individual, institutional, and structural. Individual discrimination is the purposeful treatment of others differently because of their race, ethnicity, or gender. The term "institutional discrimination" describes the actions of persons in positions of power within institutions as well as the laws passed by dominant groups. Structural discrimination combines the individual actions of those who implement institutional policies defined

by the dominant group and exercise authority within the organization (Pincus, 1996). This means that if individuals in positions of authority within an institution engage in discriminatory behavior, it is considered institutional discrimination.

Within schools, there are various types of formal and informal structures. For this study, I have defined institutional discrimination as unequal behaviors arising from structures, decision-making processes, and responsible bodies. This includes biases that occur or are observed within the School Management Committee (SMC), among teachers, and within the school administration. Such bias occurs intentionally or unintentionally. This type of discrimination generally occurs not because of personal hostility but because of institutional practices and decisions (Bhattachan et al., 2009; Pincus, 1996). Therefore, this study has considered institutional discrimination as practices that limit participation and opportunities to a particular group. This study examines institutional discrimination, as schools are among the key social institutions responsible for providing equal educational opportunities to all. When institutional practices favor certain groups and limit others, such as Dalit students, they help reproduce inequalities. Therefore, in this research, institutional discrimination refers to the practices, decisions, and processes the school adopts that may deny equal opportunities.

Structural discrimination is more complex. It arises from phenomena related to social, economic, cultural, and political structures (Pincus, 1996; Sunar, 2019). In this study, structural discrimination is indicated through factors such as poverty, low educational status of parents, child labor, child marriage, and social exclusion

Silence and normalization are also among the phenomena discussed in this study. For silence, what I mean is the practice by teachers, students, and school administration of not responding to incidents of caste-based discrimination. They remain silent or ignore it when caste-based discrimination happens. Normalization is defined as the practice of dismissing or accepting caste-related comments, behaviors, neglect, or inequality by saying, “This is a normal thing.”

### **Historical Roots of Caste-based Discrimination in South Asia**

It is imperative to discuss the historical roots and civilizational background of caste-based discrimination to understand the phenomenon in Nepali schools. In South Asia, especially in societies where the Hindu varna system has been in operation, caste has been a product of that social structure. The Hindu varna system divided society into four groups: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, and later this

structure became more rigid and complex, leading to the development of caste hierarchy (Ketkar, 1909; Risley, 1915). This hierarchy gradually transformed into a system. In the beginning, the varna system was a social category based on occupation, but later it changed into a rigid structure based on birth (Olivelle, 1999). The birth-based system created an exclusionary and hierarchical structure and, over time, strengthened inequality. Many scholars argue that Manu played a strong role in making this inequality more rigid. The Manusmriti not only legitimized the caste hierarchy but also established a code of conduct defining what each caste could and could not do (Olivelle, 1999). The Manusmriti also prohibited Dalits from reading and exercising other rights.

Due to the influence of *Manusmriti* (Manu's Code) and other religious books, as well as legal codes and state practices, caste-based discrimination became institutionalized in many South Asian societies. It affected mostly areas where the Hindu state and caste structures were prevalent. For example, Manusmriti 1.87 describes how the four varnas originated from the four parts of Brahma's body, mouth, arms, thigh, and feet, symbolically placing the Shudra at the bottom of the hierarchy. Other verses prescribe unequal punishments and social restrictions for lower castes (e.g., *Manusmriti* 8.413; 10.4), which scholars describe as the origin of caste-based inequality in South Asia (Shah, 2001).

In Nepal, even before this, in the 14th century, King Jayasthiti Malla introduced the Manab Nyaya Shastra, based on the Manusmriti, which helped institutionalize the caste system (Jha, 2025). Later, the Muluki Ain of 1854 further formalized the caste system by legally classifying communities according to notions of purity and pollution. This law also restricted Dalits' access to education, public spaces, and state resources (Aahuti, 2013; Hangen, 2020). These kinds of practices and structures existed across the Indian subcontinent or South Asia and made caste discrimination institutionally, socially, and legally valid.

### **Legal and Policy Framework Against Caste Discrimination**

Discrimination in education in Nepal probably started formally after the introduction of "The Civil Code" by the Rana rulers in 1854. The code placed Dalits at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and labeled Dalits into two categories: "*Pani Nachalne Chhoichhito Halnu Naparne*" (impure but touchable) and "*Pani Nachalne Chhoichhito Halnu Parne*" (untouchable). Many restrictions were imposed on the lives of Dalit people, including their access to education. They were not allowed to

study (Bennett, 2005). As a result, Dalits were excluded from many public spaces and opportunities. Suman Poudel of the Dalit NGO Federation (DNF) noted that the state actively enforced restrictions, and those who violated or attempted to violate them were punished. Caste-based discrimination was formally abolished with the amendment of the Civil Code in 1963; however, it was not strongly enforced (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2010).

All the constitutions implemented in Nepal since then have continued the provision, including the present Constitution of Nepal 2015. Its outlawed caste discrimination through Articles 24 (Right against Untouchability and Discrimination) and 40 (Rights of Dalits) (Constituent Assembly Secretariat [CAS], 2015). A dedicated legal provision was also advanced, the Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense and Punishment) Act of 2011, which forbids discrimination and criminalizes the practice (Nepal Law Commission [NLC], 2011). Similarly, the National Education Policy 2019 also aims to eliminate untouchability and the psychological effects of discrimination (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019). Some other Acts have also outlawed caste-based discrimination in school.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Nepal, many children, particularly from intersectional groups, face subtle forms of discrimination that have been documented through several studies. Many studies have examined discrimination and inequality in education, but they mostly focus on structural issues such as enrollment, dropout rates, and policies (Bennett, 2005; Ministry of Education [MoE] et al., 2016). Because most of these studies are based on quantitative or mixed methods, they have a limited scope to explain how discrimination is lived and experienced by Dalit or marginalized communities in everyday classroom interactions. As a result, there is limited understanding of how caste-based discrimination operates through daily behavior, interactions, and relationships in classrooms among teachers, teachers-to-students, management-to-teachers, and management-to-students.

During the review of earlier studies, including some qualitative research, I found that most of the research mainly highlights structural barriers and policy weaknesses. (for example, enrollment disparities or policy gaps). There has been very little discussion of direct or indirect discrimination in daily school life, including microaggressions such as caste-related slurs, exclusion from peer groups, and biased

seating arrangements that preserve inequality in the classroom (Sunar, 2019). Only limited attention has been paid to subtle, normal-looking discriminatory practices. However, caste-based name-calling, biased seating arrangements, unequal behavior by teachers, and silence are still present and are often treated as normal. Detailed descriptions of these practices are generally unavailable (Sunar, 2019). There is still a lack of thick description of such behaviors.

Teachers are expected to promote equality and fairness in school by instilling the idea of equity and equality. However, evidence shows that teachers sometimes discriminate either knowingly or unknowingly based on caste and other identities. This includes direct practices (for example, making students sit separately) or indirect bias (for example, having low academic expectations for Dalit students) (Cameron, 1998; MoE et al., 2016). Such behaviors are considered normal and therefore rarely questioned. As a result, discrimination silently continues and keeps reproducing another form of discrimination.

It is also evident that institutional bodies, such as the School Management Committee (SMC), often play a limited role in preventing discrimination. Rather, they discriminate against themselves by limiting Dalit participation, distributing opportunities unequally, or ignoring their grievances, which makes power relations inside schools more unequal.

When students repeatedly see discriminatory behavior, unequal treatment, or silence from authorities, they start to see these things as normal. Such repeated experiences make discrimination seem natural, and students learn that discriminating against or tolerating discrimination is acceptable. Students, instead of learning justice, equality, and human values, start learning discrimination, and schools become a learning center. This circumstance affects marginalized students' self-respect, identity, and connection to school.

Nepal has many legal and policy provisions against caste-based discrimination; however, it continues in public schools, including in Madhesh. There is a lack of genuine study on how caste-based discrimination is practiced, ignored, and normalized. This gap in the literature establishes the need for in-depth, ethnographic research to examine how schools reproduce caste-based discrimination. It is necessary to address this problem since recurring experience of discriminatory practices determines children's belonging and dignity.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how caste-based discrimination is manifested, how it is reproduced, how it is negotiated by Dalit students in everyday school life in Madhesh. The study focuses on the processes through which routine interactions in school, practices of school as an institution, and school-based activities contribute to the reproduction and normalization of caste-based discrimination. It also examines the role of school, particularly how teachers, peers, and School Management Committees shape these processes, and how Dalit students respond to such practices in their daily school lives.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does caste-based discrimination manifest in the daily experiences of Dalit students?
2. How do the practices of teachers, peers, and school management committees shape caste-based discrimination in school?
3. How do Dalit students respond to discrimination?

The focus of the study is mainly on "how," as I want to explore the processes, experiences, and everyday practices in school that help reproduce and sustain discrimination. I am not only interested in identifying the presence of discrimination but also in understanding social interactions, meanings, and mechanisms. Therefore, the "how" question is used to deep dive into the process and experience within the school. The use of "how" questions is suitable for ethnographic research because it helps to explore everyday experiences in depth and within their real context. This approach focuses more on understanding processes and meanings than on finding direct cause-and-effect relationships (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

### **Significance of the Study**

There is no need to reiterate the importance of school in students' overall development. Schools support the development of all important aspects of a child's life. They provide not only knowledge and skills, but also opportunities for social relationships and interaction. School reflects society. The behavior between teachers and students, and among students themselves, plays an important role in children's social development. However, when the school itself becomes a place where discrimination is practiced or reproduced, serious problems arise.

The caste system exists in different forms in many countries. In Nepal and India, caste-based discrimination exists along with the caste system. The form and

intensity of discrimination can differ by place and community. Discrimination occurs not only on the basis of caste but also on the basis of religion, gender, and geographic identity. Economic discrimination also exists. As a result, some studies show that economically better-off students face less discrimination than other Dalit students (Bishwakarma, 2009). In other words, wealthier Dalits face less discrimination than poorer ones.

In recent decades, efforts have been made in Nepal to reduce caste-based discrimination through laws, policies, and positive discrimination programs (Bishwakarma, 2017). However, in practice, discrimination continues in workplaces and schools. There is a wide gap between legal provisions and everyday practices in schools. This study tries to understand and highlight this gap. It seeks to point out how caste-based discrimination is practiced in daily school life, and how discrimination is ignored or normalized.

Another important focus of this study is on small, subtle, indirect, and everyday forms of discrimination in schools. Most earlier studies have focused on visible and structural issues, such as enrollment and dropout. In contrast, this study tries to understand caste-based discrimination by focusing on everyday behaviors, interactions, and experiences in public school life.

In this way, this study highlights caste-based discrimination from an insider's perspective and contributes to understanding it based on students' direct experiences. Although schools are meant to be places of equality, this study shows how discrimination is quietly reproduced within them. The outcome of this research can be useful for academicians, teachers, School Management Committees, policymakers, and researchers who want to make schools more inclusive and just.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

This study focuses on one school. The study is limited to a government school in Janakpur Sub-Metropolitan City, Dhanusha district, Madhesh Province. This area is socially and culturally diverse, and caste relations play an important role in everyday life. The reason for selecting this area for the study is that very few studies have been conducted on caste-based discrimination at the school level here.

In this study, I have focused on the experiences of Dalit students studying in public schools. Private schools and religious education institutions such as madrasas and gurukuls are not included in this study. I have discussed the social and structural

context in this study, but a detailed political or policy analysis has not been conducted.

The participants in this study include students, teachers, members of the School Management Committee (SMC), and parents who are directly connected to the school. Policymakers, government officials, and other actors outside the school are not included. The study tries to cover daily classroom practices, student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions, and school-level experiences.

As this study is based on critical ethnography, it is limited to qualitative data only. The findings are based on long-term fieldwork and participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to represent the overall situation of all schools in Nepal.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized into eight chapters. Chapter I is the introduction. It presents the background and discusses key concepts of caste and caste-based discrimination. It also briefly discusses the historical, legal, and policy context in Nepal regarding caste and caste-based discrimination. This chapter also includes the research gap, research problem, objectives, research questions, significance, and limitations of the study.

Chapter II reviews the existing literature across four broader themes: thematic, empirical, theoretical, and policy. This chapter examines the literature and identifies gaps.

Chapter III explains the research methodology. It discusses philosophical assumptions, research paradigms, and the use of critical ethnography. This chapter also includes the research site, participants, data collection methods, ethical considerations, and the process of meaning-making.

Chapter IV presents the findings on the everyday manifestation of caste in school life, which addresses research question 1. It focuses on how caste-based discrimination appears through daily interactions among students and teachers.

Chapter V analyzes how caste-based discrimination is reproduced through institutional practices, silence, and power relations. It answers research question 2 by examining the roles of school administration, teachers, and School Management Committees in either maintaining or ignoring discrimination.

Chapter VI addresses research question 3 and focuses on Dalit students' coping strategies and responses. It explores how Dalit students deal with discrimination through silence, normalization, withdrawal, and acts of resistance.

Chapter VII discusses and interprets the findings by linking them with existing literature and theoretical perspectives. And Chapter VIII concludes the study, summarizing the key findings and discussing implications.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this introductory chapter, I have started with the background of the study. I have tried to connect the study with a real incident and to mention my own experience and motivation. While raising the issue of how caste-based discrimination still exists inside schools, I have discussed concepts such as caste, discrimination, silence, normalization, and institutional and structural discrimination. The general introduction of the main themes of the study not only introduces the topic but also helps to clarify these concepts.

After this, I have tried to show how such practices are commonly accepted in everyday school life. I have also briefly discussed the legal and policy provisions in Nepal to end caste-based discrimination and highlighted the weaknesses in their practical implementation. Through a review of previous studies, I have found that subtle, everyday caste-based discrimination in schools, especially in public schools in Madhesh, has not yet been adequately studied.

In this context, the research problem, objectives, research questions, significance of the study, and limitations of the study have been presented. Overall, this chapter tries to establish the need for this study to understand how caste-based discrimination is created, ignored, and normalized within everyday school practices.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines existing research on caste-based discrimination in Nepalese schools. It is organized into four sections: thematic review, empirical review, theoretical review, and policy review, followed by the research gap.

#### **Thematic Review**

Schools have not only the role of teaching skills but also socializing students and passing on cultural values. Schools also pass on social beliefs and practices as they are necessary for the students to participate in society. On the positive side, this is good; however, on the negative side, schools may transfer even such values that are unacceptable and unjust from the modern perspective. As a result, students often face prejudice and discrimination in school based on different identity markers such as caste, religion, gender, and geographical region.

Schools in Nepal, as in South Asia more broadly, have not developed into neutral institutions because they are closely connected to existing social structures. In fact, schools often reproduce these very structures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This reproduction of discrimination does not usually happen openly. Rather, it appears through daily practices, unspoken rules, and school values (Apple & Apple, 2004). This thematic review attempts to analyze these issues.

#### **Schools as a Place of Social Reproduction**

Many studies explain schools as places where social inequality is reproduced. Scholars argue that schools treat the language, behavior, and ways of thinking of dominant groups as normal and correct, and establish them as the standard benchmark, while giving less value to the practices and identities of marginalized groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This means that schools do not simply reflect society but actively support the values of socially dominant groups (Apple & Apple, 2004). In this way, instead of challenging inequality, schools normalize it. Research in the Nepali context shows that classroom language and behavior associated with upper castes are considered better and more acceptable.

Dalit students are often seen as weak, less hardworking, or less capable, even though there is no solid basis for such assumptions. Teachers are found to have lower expectations for Dalit students, provide less encouragement, and offer fewer

leadership opportunities (Hamal, 2020). These practices do not appear to be open discrimination but rather take subtle forms that strengthen caste inequality (Subedi, 2022). This shows that schools often support caste hierarchy while presenting it as equality and merit.

### **Everyday Discrimination and Its Normalization**

As described above, caste-based discrimination in schools does not occur overtly; it is hidden in small, everyday practices such as teasing among friends, caste-based insults, ways of forming groups, seating arrangements, and how teachers address students (Bishwakarma, 2016; Guru, 2009).

Students use abusive language and derogatory remarks toward each other. Such behaviors are often described as "jokes" or "friendly banter"; however, they cause significant harm to Dalit students (Froerer, 2011). Schools 'normalize' it, ignoring the consequences, thinking it 'harmless,' but this normalization is not harmless. Repeated exposure to such behavior reduces Dalit students' self-respect, weakens their confidence, and can reduce their interest in learning (Bourdieu, 1991). Studies show that this kind of normalized discrimination can be more harmful than open exclusion because it is not recognized even as a problem.

### **Silence, Denial, and Institutional Involvement**

Another issue closely connected to everyday discrimination is silence. In many schools, there is an environment where caste-related issues are avoided. Teachers ignore caste-based comments, school administrations claim that everyone is equal and discourage discussion, and policies focus more on formal inclusion than lived experience. Studies show that caste-related topics are often avoided in the name of maintaining harmony or equality (Hamal, 2020; Pokharel, 2018).

This silence is not simple or neutral. Research shows that when schools act as if nothing is wrong, their silence helps discrimination continue (Apple & Apple, 2004; Freire, 1970). When caste discrimination is presented as an issue of the past, Dalit students are unable to speak openly. They subdue their emotions, and their experiences are never heard. As a result, those who should be held accountable remain unquestioned.

### **Intersection of Caste with Other Social Identities**

The experience of discrimination varies across social identities, such as gender, class, religion, and geographical location (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, a Dalit boy and a Dalit girl do not experience discrimination in the same way. Amnesty

International (2024) conducted a study in Nepal and found that caste-based discrimination in schools is intersectional. Students experience discrimination differently depending on different factors such as caste, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. For example, while Dalit boys may face discrimination mainly due to caste, Dalit girls might face discrimination based on both caste and gender. This double marginalization can be even worse if the girl has disability and worse if she is also poor. This intersection of social identities creates layered, complex forms of discrimination (Paudel, 2015). So, the experience of discrimination is unequal for everyone, and intersectionality helps us understand these phenomena.

According to Bishwakarma (2009), because of caste-based discrimination, Dalit students have to face many challenges in their academic life. He notes that the experiences of rich and poor students differ. Dalit students who are economically strong and receive good family support face less discrimination compared to Dalit students who are economically weak and receive less family support. In the Tarai region of Nepal, in rural areas of *Nawalparasi* district with conditions similar to ours, Lamsal and Maharjan (2017) studied the effects of poverty and caste discrimination on Dalit children's learning. The study found that economic difficulties and the negative discriminatory attitudes of teachers, school administration, and peers negatively affected Dalit students' participation and learning in schools. So, all these factors need to be considered together for the wholistic understanding of the phenomenon. Looking at caste alone without considering other identities can lead to an incomplete understanding of realities.

### **Policy–Practice Gap**

Nepal has progressive laws and solid constitutional provisions against caste-based discrimination. However, many studies show a large gap between policy and practice. Schools often present themselves as inclusive by highlighting enrollment, scholarships, and infrastructure (Hangen, 2020; Pokharel, 2018). However, issues such as student dignity, voice, participation, and daily interaction are often ignored. As a result, schools claim to be inclusive, but Dalit students continue to be marginalized in practice (Subedi, 2022). This makes it easier for schools to appear inclusive while inequality remains unchanged. The common conclusion of these studies is that discrimination exists in schools. Not only students, but teachers and school administration are also involved in it. These studies differ in their focus and level of analysis, yet they complement each other. While Hangen (2020) and Pokharel

(2018) emphasize structural indicators, Subedi (2022) critically examines everyday school practices and social interactions. This suggests that although policy reforms have improved access to education, they have been less effective in addressing subtle and everyday forms of caste-based discrimination.

### **Methodological and Conceptual Limitations in Existing Literature**

Although many studies on caste-based discrimination in schools exist, they have some limitations. Many studies rely on quantitative methods or short-term qualitative research, which cannot capture subtle forms of discrimination, such as silence, avoidance, and normalization (Carspecken, 1996). Many studies focus on policy and access rather than on everyday school life. Ethnographic studies are particularly rare in Madhesh Province, leaving the region's social and cultural realities inadequately represented.

### **Empirical Review**

Many empirical studies on caste-based discrimination in schools have been conducted in Nepal, India, and other South Asian countries. These studies show that Dalit students face major issues related to access to education and social inclusion. However, these studies differ in their methods, focus, and depth. When they are grouped and analyzed together, they show common results and patterns, as well as important limitations and gaps. In this review, I have grouped studies by research method and presented their depth and limitations.

### **Quantitative Studies and their Common Focus**

The relationship between caste-based discrimination and educational outcomes such as enrollment, attendance, test scores, and dropout rates has been the primary focus of major quantitative research in Nepal. MoE et al. (2016), for instance, examined differences in academic outcomes between Dalit and non-Dalit students at a community school in the Kavre district. The study found that Dalit students had lower attendance and weaker exam results than non-Dalit students. This study is supported by Bishwakarma's (2018) analysis of national data, which found that Dalit students have lower enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, and lower pass rates.

Both results unequivocally demonstrate that Dalit students' academic performance is negatively impacted by caste-based prejudice. In the same vein, Bohara's (2025) survey in Kirtipur shows that caste-based discrimination continues to affect students' daily participation and interactions, even in relatively urban settings. Although this study is not conducted in a school setting, it is relevant to the larger

educational system and supports MoE et al. (2016) and Bishwakarma's (2018) claims that discrimination persists despite modernization and legislation.

However, the common weakness of these quantitative studies is that they only demonstrate what is occurring—not why or how. They don't explain how students are emotionally affected by prejudice, how peers connect with one another, or how teachers conduct themselves in the classroom. They mainly focus on statistical patterns of inequality without explaining the underlying processes through which discrimination occurs. Therefore, there is a need for qualitative research examining how caste-based discrimination is produced and experienced in daily school interactions.

### **Qualitative Studies and Interpretation of Experiences**

Some qualitative studies have tried to address these limitations. For example, Bishwakarma (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with Dalit students in Gandaki Province and presented their school experiences. His study showed that Dalit students are often forced to sit at the back of classrooms. They are called “untouchable,” and are ignored by teachers in classroom interactions. These findings clarify the socioeconomic causes of the subpar academic performance noted by MoE et al. (2016).

Studies conducted in India, where the social and cultural context is similar to Nepal, are also important for review. Froerer (2011) and Nambissan (2010), using ethnographic and observational methods respectively, found that caste-based insults, humiliation, and exclusion are treated as "normal" and parts of daily school life. Teachers often do not intervene, which subtly justifies discrimination.

Supporting these findings, the longitudinal study by Jeffrey et al. (2008) showed that repeated experiences of school-based discrimination cause many Dalit students to lose trust in education as a path to social mobility.

However, qualitative studies also have limitations. While they include Dalit students' voices, they often fail to adequately include the perspectives of teachers, school administration, and School Management Committees. As a result, they do not clearly explain how discrimination continues through institutional structures and decision-making processes.

### **Mixed-Method Studies and their Explanations**

Some studies have used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Chalaune (2020) conducted interviews and focus group discussions with 235 Dalit students

from Kailali and Achham districts and revealed that about 70 percent of students experience some form of discrimination at least once a week. This is a huge number, which shows how 'normal' it is treated and how it is ignored.

A similar study by Thorat (2009) in India claims further that even when academic ability is similar, Dalit students are treated differently. This implies that identification rather than aptitude is more closely associated with the subpar academic performance of Dalit students.

Bennett (2005) used surveys and policy analysis to show that Dalit students in Nepal regularly face humiliation, neglect, and unequal treatment in schools. He found discrimination in both teacher–student and student–student relationships, but his study does not describe daily classroom practices in detail. Similarly, Bhoi and Lakra (2022) used survey data and institutional analysis to show that Scheduled Caste students face social exclusion and institutional neglect in higher education. Since their study focuses on higher education, it does not capture the everyday practices of school life. Overall, mixed-method studies also fail to deeply analyze the social processes through which discrimination is reproduced.

### **Overall Analysis and Research Gaps**

Overall, these studies clearly show that caste-based discrimination exists in schools. Quantitative studies show the scale of inequality, while qualitative studies reveal emotional and psychological impacts. However, very few studies explain how discrimination is sustained through silence, normalization, and everyday practices.

Another important gap is geography. Most studies have been conducted outside Madhesh Province, even though caste, religion, language, and regional identity are deeply interconnected in Madhesh. There is also a methodological gap, as there are very few ethnographic studies based on long-term engagement in a single school in Madhesh.

Therefore, there is a clear need for ethnographic research that closely examines daily practices, interactions, and institutional behavior in schools.

### **Theoretical Review**

There are multiple theories that can be applied to understand caste-based discrimination in school. However, four theoretical perspectives- Social Exclusion Theory, Social Reproduction Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Intersectionality - have been reviewed that provide essential lenses to interpret how caste discrimination persists and operates within Nepalese schools.

Social Exclusion Theory believes that individuals or groups are systematically marginalized from mainstream in terms of social, economic, and political participation. For Dalit students, caste-based discrimination results in social exclusion as it restricts their access to quality education and societal integration (Sen, 2000). This theory confirms the importance of addressing structural disparities to promote inclusive education in schools.

Social Reproduction Theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, discusses how social disparities, including Caste-based inequalities, are preserved from generation to generation. The theory claims that the education system plays a critical role in reproducing these inequalities as it favors dominant cultural values and practices and dismisses the value of marginalized communities that further marginalize minority groups, such as Dalits (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Dalit students tolerate discriminatory practices, which lead to lower educational outcomes and reinforce social stratification. This theory believes that the educational system reproduces social hierarchies by legitimizing unequal access to resources and opportunities.

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy advocates for an education system that challenges traditional power structures and promotes social justice. It underscores the need to empower marginalized students to critically examine societal injustices and work to transform them (Freire, 1970). This approach encourages students to question and challenge social injustices. It sees schools as learning spaces where students can be empowered and encouraged to change their lives (McLaren, 2023), fostering questioning and critical thinking. Unlike many traditional teaching methods, critical pedagogy focuses on dialogue, reflection, and action (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011). It supports democratic values and aims to connect education with real-life social issues (Darder et al., 2023). Teachers and students work together to create a learning environment that promotes equality, freedom, and personal growth.

Intersectionality is a theoretical lens and methodological standard that examines how social and cultural identities, including gender, color, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, and country, interact to shape an individual's experiences of oppression and privilege. These identities together interconnect and influence people's lives. So, intersectionality doesn't view it separately but as a system of inequality.

The concept of intersectionality can be used in different ways in research. It helps researchers understand how different forms of discrimination connect in

everyday life, clarify how different identities shape unequal experiences, and use this understanding to bring about change through politics or social action to promote justice. The area of intersectional studies promotes collaboration and literacy, with an emphasis on understanding the social processes and relationships that constitute these topics, as well as on locating the emergence and contestation of these focal points within academic and political affairs (Carbado et al., 2013).

Intersectionality is a theory that investigates how many social and cultural categories intersect. It investigates the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, and nationality (Knudsen, 2006). Intersectionality, according to Samuels and Ross-Sheriff (2008), can be used in both traditional and non-traditional ways. The traditional approach avoids essentializing a single analytical category of identity by considering how it intersects with other categories. It allows us to broaden our knowledge of gender and feminism by incorporating the impact of context and recognizing the interconnected oppressions and privileges across multiple contexts, in an unconventional approach. According to the authors, intersectionality provides a prism through which to perceive the layers and levels of oppression and privilege together, without dividing them into independent components. Intersectionality has been used both overtly and covertly in quantitative research by studying the repercussions of heterogeneity within and between social categories (Wemrell et al., 2017).

Intersectionality can be a useful way to understand the complexities of discrimination in schools. Different degrees of discrimination are observed from different caste groups in different geographies. The intensity also differs as per gender and economic status. Therefore, intersectionality can be a useful lens for examining the issue.

### **Policy Review**

Nepal has made good progress in terms of making a legal foundation to eliminate caste-based discrimination and to promote inclusive education through constitutional and legal arrangements. Legal structures have been developed, and different plans have also been implemented to some extent. The state's national and international commitments also show that the government is committed to equality. However, when these policies are examined in light of empirical evidence, a clear gap emerges between policy intentions and the realities in schools.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 addresses caste-based discrimination and guarantees the right to be free from untouchability. Article 24 of the Constitution prohibits caste-based discrimination in both public and private spaces. Through Article 31, the Constitution also ensures the right to free and compulsory education for all children (CAS, 2015). The National Civil Code Act 2017 also provides a legal framework to protect against all forms of discrimination. First, article 17 provides equality before the law for all, followed by article 18, which prohibits discrimination based on origin, religion, caste, race, sex, or disability (NLC, 2017). These provisions explain caste discrimination not only as a social problem but also as a violation of fundamental rights and as a criminal offense. In theory, this constitutional framework imagines schools as places of equality and social justice. However, problems are seen in its implementation. Research shows that various forms of discrimination still persist in schools.

In this context, the Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2011, was made to implement constitutional provisions. This Act defines all forms of caste-based discrimination and untouchability as criminal acts (NLC, 2011). It treats discrimination as a punishable crime and extends its scope to public and private areas, including educational institutions. These legal provisions create a protective framework against caste discrimination and untouchability. However, their implementation remains weak. The main reasons are that the victims mostly don't file complaints, Police generally conduct weak investigations even when complaints are filed, and pressure from powerful groups forces weaker communities to step back.

This raises an important question. Why does implementation remain ineffective even when laws exist? To understand this, policies need to be viewed in the context of Nepal's history.

The Muluki Ain of 1854 divided Hindu society into four groups based on descent: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. It legally institutionalized the caste system and untouchability. The code even categorized that caste, which was traditionally not in the 4 varna system of the Hindu caste architecture. Those castes were categorized as Matwali, and even the Matwali were further categorized into two: unenslaveable (namāsine) and enslaveable (māsine). The so-called Shudra were also divided into two further categories: Pani chalne (those with whom water can be shared-Touchable) and pani nachalne (those with whom water can be shared-

Untouchable). There was no justification from the state for the way they were categorized. However, it can be said that, as most Hindu literature suggests, the prime duty of the state is to protect Dharma (religion), and Raj Dharma (Duty of the state) is to protect the religion; the caste system was maintained (Aahuti, 2013). Prithvi Narayan Shah, who unified the then-small countries and established the modern-day Nepal, also worked to maintain the caste status quo. After conquering almost 60 small states populated by diverse ethnic groups, the Shah needed to maintain political control. It was hard to establish a new cultural norm to integrate diverse communities; therefore, he maintained the established Hindu religious and cultural norms and structures, and he made the slogan of making 'Asal Hindustan' a pure Hindu Kingdom. He established the rhetoric of 'Nepal is the garden of 4 Varna and 36 *jat* (Castes) and nurtured the hierarchy (Pradhan & Shrestha, 2005). Even before him, in the 14th Century, King Jayasthiti Malla introduced the Manab Nyaya Shashtra (Human Justice Code), which was written based on Manusmriti. (Jha, 2025).

These laws not only deprived Dalits of the right to education but also excluded them in many other areas. In 1963, caste-based discrimination was legally abolished, and several reform efforts followed. However, this system, which Nepali society has practiced for centuries, still exists in different forms. It has deeply affected schools as well. Therefore, even though policy reforms exist, their implementation remains difficult because schools were historically designed to reproduce inequality and discrimination, not justice.

Now, let us talk about education-related plans. The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016–2023 emphasized inclusion and equality. It prioritized social inclusion and gender equity, and promoted targeted interventions for marginalized groups, including Dalit students (MoE, 2016). After the completion of SSDP, another ten-year plan, the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022–2032, was developed. This plan has taken one step forward by aiming to ensure equitable access and participation. The plan aims to ensure that all children complete the full cycle of school education (MoEST, 2022). However, it is too early to say, these plans have not produced significant results. Studies show that Dalit students have lower enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, limited participation in school activities, and weaker academic achievement. This shows that inclusion is still limited mainly to access and infrastructure.

These plans have also failed to address daily school practices. They have not been able to change teachers' attitudes. They have also failed to pay enough attention to peer interactions and institutional practices.

Policy success is mostly measured through indicators such as enrollment and pass rates. As a result, issues such as silence against discrimination, ignoring discriminatory behavior, normalization of discriminatory language, and unequal distribution of opportunities within schools remain unaddressed.

In my view, Nepal's federal structure has further complicated the challenges of effective policy implementation. Decentralization is important, but giving authority up to the secondary level without developing local institutional capacity and accountability mechanisms has weakened implementation. Many local governments lack the resources and capacity needed to implement inclusive education policies. Monitoring systems are also almost absent. As a result, federal-level policy commitments are implemented unevenly across provinces and districts.

Nepal's international commitments, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education, promote non-discriminatory, equitable, and inclusive education. These frameworks emphasize not only access but also human dignity. They also stress participation and meaningful learning. However, the existence of caste-based discrimination in schools clearly shows a gap between international commitments, national policies, and local realities.

Overall, Nepal has legal and policy frameworks to eliminate caste-based discrimination, promote inclusive education, and reduce it within schools. However, sufficient attention has not been given to implementation, monitoring, and transforming school culture.

Madhesh Province has also made significant progress in establishing a legal framework for inclusive education. The government brought the Madhesh Province Education Policy, 2025. It emphasizes equity, social justice, and inclusive education, and focuses on Dalits, girls, children with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged groups. Similarly, the Madhesh Province Child Rights Act emphasizes children's dignity, participation, and protection against discrimination in schools. Although these policies demonstrate progressive intent at the provincial level, their mere presence does not automatically transform schools.

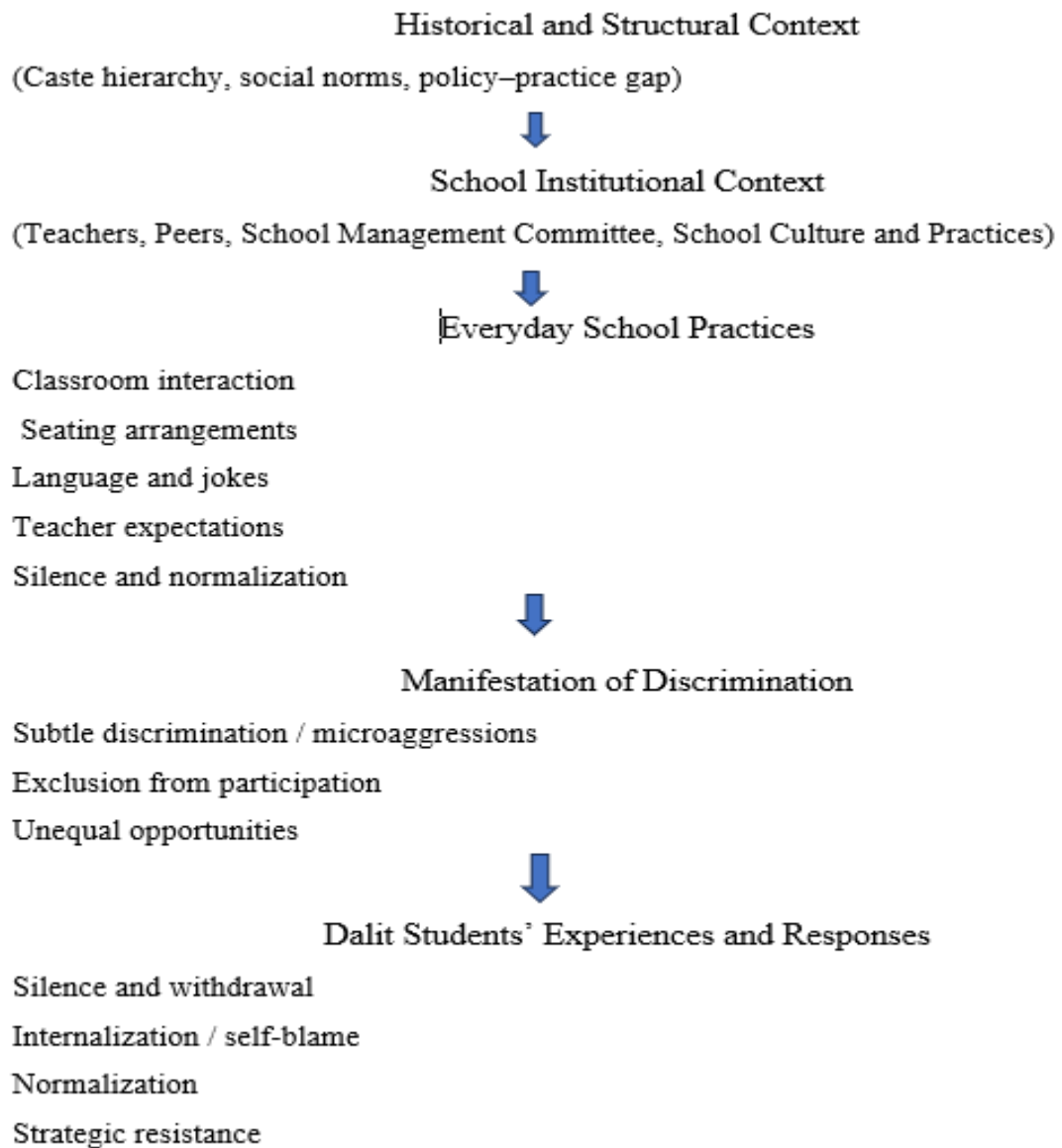
### **Conceptual Framework**

This study treats caste-based discrimination in schools as a process shaped by broader social structures and the everyday practices of the school. Historical caste hierarchy and long-standing social norms shape attitudes and behaviors within society, often reflected in schools.

Within the school, teachers, peers, and the School Management Committee play an important role in creating a culture and shaping everyday school practices. Students' school experience is shaped by activities and actions such as classroom interactions, seating arrangements, and the use of language among students and teachers. Subtle forms of discrimination are noticed in these everyday practices.

These experiences affect Dalit students in different ways. Some students may respond negatively and passively, whereas others respond positively and actively. Negative and passive responses may include remaining silent, withdrawing from participation, or normalizing discriminatory behavior, while positive and active responses may involve developing coping or resistance strategies.

The study interprets these processes using the theoretical perspectives of social exclusion, social reproduction, critical pedagogy, and intersectionality. These perspectives help explain how discrimination is produced, maintained, and experienced within school settings.

**Figure 1***Conceptual Framework***Research Gap**

This literature review clearly shows that caste-based discrimination exists in schools in Nepal. Whether thematic or empirical, all studies have analyzed the discrimination faced by Dalit students from different perspectives and explained its structural causes and its effects on educational outcomes. However, when all these studies are looked at together, it becomes clear that several important questions remain unanswered.

Sherpa et al. (2023) studied teacher-led discrimination in community schools. In their study, they collected the lived experiences of four students. They found that labeling and bias exist in schools. Teachers often favor students they consider “intelligent” and ignore others. They also identified demographic bias and showed that discrimination happens based on identity markers in the school. However, they didn't discuss caste in their study as a phenomenon of discrimination. Rather, discussed disability and explained that students with disabilities had limited participation in school activities. They stressed that teachers' practices sometimes create classroom inequality and lead to conflicts between teachers and students. Although this study discusses discrimination in general, it primarily focuses on interpersonal discrimination, such as teacher–student relationships. It does not clearly discuss caste-based discrimination nor address schools in Madhesh, which limits its geographical and contextual scope. Similarly, Bhattachan et al. (2009) studied caste-based discrimination in Nepal's education system. They pointed out problems such as barriers in enrollment, high dropout rates among Dalit students, and exclusion of Dalits from school activities. They showed that even when Dalit students reach school, many drop out. They also found that School Management Committees (SMC) often exclude Dalit students. Biases were also seen in curriculum and scholarship distribution. The School Management Committee (SMC) is the school's main decision-making body. The SMC manages administration, makes policy decisions for the school, and regulates the school's daily activities. It also works as a link between the school and the community and affects the overall school environment (Bhattachan et al., 2009; MoEST, 2019).

In the Nepalese context, most studies use quantitative or mixed-method approaches (Chalaune, 2020; MoE et al., 2016). Only a few studies have used qualitative methods in Nepal. These studies have shown the correlation between caste-based discrimination and educational outcomes- enrollment, dropout rates, exam results, and attendance. However, they have not clearly explained how Dalit students experience discrimination in their daily school life. They have not deeply explored how discrimination appears in classrooms, and how relationships with peers and teachers' behavior shape Dalit students' experience. These studies also have limitations in terms of explaining subtle experiences such as emotional pain, feelings of humiliation, and impacts on self-respect. Practices such as silence, fear, and normalization are largely missing (Bishwakarma, 2018).

The majority of qualitative studies conducted in Nepal are geographically constrained because they have focused on the hill region or Sudurpaschim Province (Bishwakarma, 2018; Chalaune, 2020), where social and cultural practices differ from those in Madhesh Province.

Many studies have analyzed caste-based discrimination as a policy-level or structural problem (Bennett, 2005; Bhattachan et al., 2009), in those studies, examination of power relations within schools is absent. A school itself is a small society that reflects the wider social system. So, exploration of how daily practices and power relations within schools reproduce discrimination is essential. Behaviors that are considered normal can also be discriminatory, and such discrimination continues to be reproduced because of ignorance and silence.

Studies focusing on the roles of teachers, school administration, and, especially, School Management Committees (SMCs) are limited. Some studies have highlighted the lack of Dalit representation in SMCs and their exclusion from decision-making processes (Bhattachan et al., 2009), but there is little in-depth research on how SMC decisions affect the lives of Dalit students.

Most studies explain the perspectives of the primary group that experiences discrimination, that is, Dalit students. However, there is little effort to deeply understand the thinking and reasoning of those who discriminate or reproduce discrimination, such as teachers, non-Dalit students, and school administration. Therefore, there is a clear need for ethnographic studies conducted over a long period of time in schools, especially in Madhesh Province. Although progressive policies such as the Madhesh Province Education Policy, 2025, and the Child Rights Act exist, there is limited empirical evidence on how these policies are, or are not, implemented in daily school life. To understand the gap between policy commitments and school realities in depth, ethnographic research is necessary. Therefore, in my study, I have given special importance to the role of the SMC because its decisions directly affect students' school life. I also focus on everyday school practices and lived experiences to understand how caste-based discrimination is created, denied, and normalized in a public school in Madhesh.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have organized the literature review into four main sections. These are thematic, empirical, policy, and theoretical reviews. Through these sections, I have tried to understand the schooling experiences of Dalit students. For this

purpose, I have reviewed existing national and international literature. The review shows that caste-based discrimination affects the educational outcomes of Dalit students. They experience discrimination in school on a daily basis, even though caste-based discrimination is legally a crime. Another finding is that most studies have used quantitative or mixed methods designs. There are very few qualitative studies, and those that exist are not focused on the context of Madhesh. Ethnographic studies are even fewer ethnographic studies.

In Madhesh Province, caste, religion, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect. There are very few studies that look at this issue. In this chapter, I have also identified research gaps.

## CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

During this research, I spent an extended period—almost one and a half months— in the field. Being out in the field, spending time with participants, and observing their daily activities and unique interactions enriched my understanding of their ideas and perspectives. As a researcher, this type of observation was essential to me in order to gain a thorough understanding of the context. Long-term involvement and minute observation are essential to ethnographic research, as they allow the researcher to understand social practices in a natural setting. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Madison, 2012).

Understanding school life in a bid to witness how Caste-based discrimination operates in an educational setting was neither easy nor possible through short visits. Certainly, formal interviews alone could not be a suitable tool to justify the complexity of the subject matter. Therefore, spending time with both teachers and students, sitting in classrooms, and observing their daily routines was necessary. Most often, things do not manifest explicitly; they appear mostly implicitly, through silence and hesitation. Human behavior cannot be judged solely by the things or actions they do, but also by the things or actions they do not do or avoid. Observation of everyday behaviors can be a reliable tool for understanding such phenomena. Eventually, my regular presence helped me identify patterns slowly but with clarity.

In the early phase of the fieldwork, I felt uncomfortable as I was unsure where to start, including my own role as a researcher. Teachers and students were unfamiliar with me. It immediately showed up through teachers' hesitations. Some teachers refused to participate. This experience helped me understand the power relations within the school. I also came to terms with a harsher reality, but a common challenge of being in the field that neither everyone would cooperate with nor would I gain trust easily. Despite their initial response, I continued visiting the school regularly to build their trust. I also took some of the classes to be part of their daily life and teaching-learning environment. Slowly, both teachers and students became more comfortable with my presence. In the days to come, informal conversations began, and they became more meaningful than formal interviews. This experience provided me with a

new perspective that planned questions are often not enough to produce knowledge. Spending time and blending in with subjects, forming informational bonds with them, gaining their trust, providing them with a safe space to speak up, ensuring they are heard, and having lived interaction are more essential.

As a researcher, I made philosophical assumptions that defined my methodological approach and my perspective on social reality (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology). These assumptions guided my research and helped me understand the occurrences under consideration.

### **Ontology**

Ontology refers to the study of what reality is (Berryman, 2019). Ontology is the “reality” that researchers investigate. I believe that reality is shaped by social, economic, ethnic, political, cultural, and gender values that crystallize over time. Each and every student, teacher, parent, and other individual, even within the same setting (i.e., school), for this research, has a unique background and lived experiences that contribute to their individual reality. Therefore, the ontology of this research is characterized by the recognition of multiple realities.

My comprehension of social reality is founded on the conviction that caste is not only a fixed structure but also something produced and reproduced through daily practices, language, and relationships among various entities. Reality, in this sense, is lived and experienced differently by different groups. Therefore, the ontology of this research is characterized by the recognition of multiple realities. My ontological perspective in this research recognizes the complex and multifaceted nature of reality and acknowledges the significance of individual experiences and social contexts in understanding caste-based discrimination in educational institutions such as schools.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology addresses the researcher’s relationship to reality. It refers to the tactics used to promote a particular viewpoint or to undertake a study to better comprehend reality. Both knowledge and reality are socially produced and influenced by power dynamics. It focuses on how knowledge is created, understood, and interpreted in research. My epistemological viewpoint in this research concerns the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired and formed. It assumes that knowledge is not completely objective but is constructed through interaction between the researcher and the participants in a specific social context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998).

I recognize that knowledge is not objective or detached from social contexts, but is rather shaped by the perspectives, experiences, beliefs, and practices of the research participants. Therefore, my understanding is impacted by my research participants' knowledge, their experiences, beliefs, and practices, which I observed and interacted with during the study. I actively engaged with the participants by listening to their stories, conducting face-to-face interviews, and closely observing their behaviors, norms, and social arrangements. These interactions and observations contributed to the formation of knowledge and understanding.

### **Research Paradigm: Critical Theory Research Paradigm**

Critical theory differs from traditional theory in that it challenges the status quo and strives for a more balanced, democratic society, aiming to liberate people from oppressive circumstances (Asghar, 2013). The three criteria for critical theory proposed by Bohman (2005, as cited in Asghar, 2013) are as follows: describing what is wrong with existing social reality, outlining actions to alter it, and giving explicit norms for criticism and transformation. By stressing historically placed systems, critical theory academics aim to critique and modify social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values. This paradigm frequently employed long-term ethnographic investigations and recognized that assumptions are subjective, and knowledge is rooted in social and historical routines, making it value-dependent rather than value-free (Healy & Perry, 2000).

### **Critical Ethnography Research**

Critical theory, as a research paradigm, necessitated long-term study in a natural setting, and critical ethnography was considered an appropriate methodology for it (Healy & Perry, 2000). Critical ethnography offered an ideologically sensitive approach to cultural study that coincided with the needs of critical theory (Canagarajah, 2014). Traditional ethnography observes people's actions in their natural context and engages with participants to grasp their meaning (Brewer, 2010), but critical ethnography seeks to go beyond basic description to improve the situation. It questions power relation inequalities and domination (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2012). Marxism, Neo-Marxism, and the Frankfurt School of critical thought are the foundations of critical ethnography. One key feature of critical ethnography is that it amplifies the voices of marginalized communities. It "takes a stand" for marginalized communities, as Madison (2012) notes.

So, I opted for critical ethnography because I was concerned with the cultural factors that lead to prejudice. Caste-based discrimination is embedded in culture, and it takes place in subtle, accepted, and unnoticed ways. Critical ethnography holds that school is not a neutral place but a reflection of the society in which social hierarchy is reproduced (Carspecken, 1996). The reflexive character of critical ethnography is another crucial aspect. The researcher accepts their role and duty rather than claiming to be impartial or dispassionate in the research process. I was able to critically and ethically assess data and stay aware of power disparities during observations and interviews thanks to this reflexivity. Additionally, social justice and critical ethnography are strongly related. As Foley (2002) points out, the objective is to both comprehend and combat oppression. It views discrimination as a systemic and institutional problem rooted in social reproduction and exclusion, rather than an individual issue.

Coming from a privileged background and a caste group that sits at the top of the hierarchy, I knew that I lacked a firsthand understanding of the experiences of discriminated groups. Therefore, critical ethnography helped me capture the nuances of discrimination from their perspective, which would not have been possible with the traditional ethnographic approach. Critical ethnography allows an in-depth exploration of everyday school life, capturing subtle and normalized forms of caste-based discrimination that may not be visible through other methods.

### **Theoretical Connection**

Discrimination, in any form, is a multifaceted subject. As it has many facets, intersectionality seeks to establish the links between various socio-cultural categories and identities. Intersectionality is a philosophy that investigates how social and cultural categories intersect, particularly the interdependence of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, and nationality (Knudsen, 2006). According to Samuels and Ross-Sheriff (2008), intersectionality can be employed in both traditional and non-traditional ways. By combining other interlinking groups, the traditional approach avoids reducing identity to a sole analytical category. The latter approach allows us to broaden our understanding of gender and feminism to include the impact of context and to pay attention to interrelated forms of oppression and privilege across multiple contexts. The authors argue that intersectionality provides a lens through which layers and levels of oppression and privilege can be understood collectively rather than as separate components.

The application of intersectionality as a framework offers a more nuanced understanding of the multiple forms of discrimination in schools. Individuals from different castes, genders, economic classes, and geographical locations experience varied degrees of discrimination in different ways. Because these categories are closely connected, intersectionality offers a comprehensive lens for analyzing and understanding discrimination in school settings.

### **Research Design**

This section includes various subsections that are critical to this research. These include site selection, participant selection, fieldwork, the meaning-making process, quality standards, and research ethics. Each of these subsections is important to ensure that the research is conducted ethically and methodologically sound. Every stage of the research process, from selecting a suitable research site and participants to conducting fieldwork and interpreting the data, has been carefully carried out.

### **Site Selection**

Janakpur, the ancient capital of the Mithila Kingdom and the present capital of Madhesh Province in Nepal's federal setup, has always remained socially and politically active and vibrant. The city has been the epicenter of culture, religion, and politics not only in ancient times but also in modern times. Janakpur has been the Centre of many social and political movements in Madhesh and the country, leaving a lasting impact on almost all walks of life, including education and caste relations.

According to the National Population and Housing Census 2021, Janakpur Sub-metropolitan City has a total population of 194,556 living in 40,409 households, with a population density of about 2,115 persons per square kilometer. The city is further divided into 25 wards (Nepal Statistics Office [NSO], 2023). This study was conducted in one of the wards of the local government (the researcher intends to avoid mentioning the exact ward number to maintain anonymity). The ward has a total population of 8,944. Of this population, 48.6 percent are male, and 51.4 percent are female, with a sex ratio of 94.56 males per 100 females. The research site, or the Ward, represents a semi-urban setting where people from different castes, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds live close to one another. Almost the entire population of the Ward speaks only one language, Maithili, as their mother tongue, which shapes everyday social interaction and school life.

The ward's literacy rate is 65.7 percent, which is close to the local government's average. Male literacy is higher than female literacy, indicating a clear

gender gap in educational access. Despite the Ward being socially diverse, only the Terai caste groups reside in the area. Among them, *Yadav* (19.9 percent) has the largest population, followed by Muslims (17.2 percent). *Sundi* and *Teli* (13.3 percent each) have almost similar presence, followed by *Brahman* Tarai (9.7 percent), and *Dhanuk* (7.6 percent) in the ward. Dalit caste groups are in the minority, with *Tatma* or *Tatwa* having less than 5% presence; however, if we count all Dalit castes as one unit, they are around 10% of the Ward's total population. Most people in the Ward are engaged in non-agricultural work, including daily wage labor, small businesses, the service sector, and informal jobs. These social and economic conditions create visible economic inequality in everyday life, especially for Dalit and marginalized households. This makes Ward a meaningful and appropriate site to study how caste-based discrimination continues to operate within school spaces in subtle and normalized ways.

I purposefully chose Janakpur Sub-metropolitan of Dhanusha district as the field location for my research for numerous reasons. Janakpur, the provincial capital of Madhesh Province, is politically viable and socially vibrant, providing an important context for exploring issues such as caste-based discrimination. Likewise, the city itself, including the Ward, is demographically diverse in terms of caste, ethnicity, and cultural dynamics.

In addition, my own rootedness in this province serves as both motivation and epistemic strength for the research. Researchers have emphasized that studies about one's own place or own community not only provide greater access and credibility but also foster more nuanced interpretations of everyday experiences (Narayan, 1993). Janakpur is also the cultural hub and former capital of ancient Mithila, which provides a unique socio-cultural context for this study.

As I proposed in my research proposal, I was looking for a semi-urban setting where students from diverse communities, including both so-called higher and lower caste groups, study together. Another reason for selecting a semi-urban area was to capture the nuances of both urban and rural social dynamics. Accordingly, I chose one of the rural areas of Janakpur Sub-metropolitan city (the name of the school is not disclosed to maintain anonymity), where students from Brahmin, Dalit, Muslim, and other caste groups learn alongside each other.

A government community school from Janakpurdham Sub-metropolitan city was selected for this study. The school is located in a rural area of the sub-

metropolitan area. According to data provided by the school, it offers education from playgroups to Grade 12 in both technical and non-technical streams, serving students from the wards and nearby villages. The school has around 1,200 students (exact numbers are not given for anonymity) from different caste, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, including Tarai Brahmin, Muslim, Indigenous groups, business castes, and Dalit communities. Among them, 132 students belong to Dalit communities, including 47 girls and 85 boys.

The school has almost 2 dozen teachers (exact number not given for anonymity), most of whom come from non-Dalit caste backgrounds. The school has no Dalit teacher and no Dalit member in the School Management Committee. However, one teacher from a religious minority group is working there is not given for anonymity. teachers, and most of them come from non-Dalit caste backgrounds. There are no Dalit teachers or members of the School Management Committee; however, one teacher from a religious minority group is working there.

### **Entering the Field and Negotiating Access**

When I first entered the school, it was mid-November, and the results of the Bihar election had just been announced. Teachers were discussing the election as they entered the school. At that time, I was sitting in the principal's room.

One teacher said that the Bihar election had taught a lesson to *Yadavs* and *Yadavbad*, referring to the Yadav-led Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) of Bihar, who lost the election. They were discussing various election issues, which gave me the sense that caste and religion were not limited to politics but were part of everyday discussions, even among teachers in schools.

While this was happening, the headteacher was in the room, engaged in conversation with another teacher. After finishing, he inquired about the purpose of my visit. I reminded him that I had already spoken with him on the phone about my research. He then introduced me to other teachers and asked them to support my research. Although the formal introduction and the headteacher's suggestion that fellow teachers support me were encouraging, I was still unsure how to begin.

### **Feeling Discomfort and Waiting**

I started by walking around the school to get a sense of the environment. As I didn't know anyone personally, I soon felt uncomfortable walking alone. All the teachers were busy in their classrooms, so I waited until I saw one who appeared to be free and asked for his support.

After a brief introduction, he informed me that although he was a primary-level teacher, he was also responsible for administrative work. I asked him for support, so he asked me to wait. After some time, he returned and asked me for details. I briefed him once again on the purpose of my visit, and then he agreed to help.

He walked me around the school, giving me information about the infrastructure, the classrooms, and class levels, even though classes were about to end due to the mid-term examination schedule.

### **School Structure and Student Data**

The school has two streams: technical and non-technical and offers education up to class 12. At that time, students of classes 11 and 12 were planning an educational tour and were expected to be absent for about a week.

After the school visit, we—the primary teacher and I— returned to the office, where I requested school data. According to the records, the school had a total of 1,167 students, including 47 Dalit girls and 85 Dalit boys. Similarly, around 120 students came from the Muslim community. More than 50 percent of the students were female. There were also students from higher-caste groups, though most belonged to middle-caste communities.

The school had 23 teachers in total, most of whom were from higher-caste backgrounds. There was one Muslim teacher and no Dalit teacher in the school, as mentioned earlier.

### **Selecting Participants and Facing Resistance**

After reviewing the data, I identified some teachers and students and inquired about their backgrounds. Many teachers lived in the main market area of Janakpur, and some lived in my own neighborhood, making it easier for me to continue the conversation.

Later, the headteacher returned with some other teachers, and they were busy discussing administrative matters. As the school day was ending, I decided to leave.

At home, I contacted some teachers to request interviews. Some refused, some asked me to visit the school, and others did not even respond. One teacher even complained to the principal about my call and asked if I should not contact him again. The principal later advised me to avoid that teacher. At this point, I realized that data collection would be challenging.

### **Prolonged Observation and Relationship Building**

After that incident, I started visiting school almost every day. Most of the time, I only observed from a distance. I took turns interacting with teachers and students. These informal conversations helped me build relationships with them and win their trust.

Gradually, I identified teachers whom I could approach for interviews. During these informal conversations, I could also identify students for interviews. I deliberately chose students up to class 10, especially from classes 8, 9, and 10. As mentioned before, students in classes 11 and 12 were mostly absent, preparing for their educational trip, so I had to limit my participant selection.

For the research, I selected three Dalit students, two non-Dalit students, and two Muslim girls. Besides them, I interviewed the headteacher, the SMC chair, and two parents. Since ethnographic research focuses on cultural background, interviewing parents was also significant for this study. Parents are key stakeholders in the school and are part of the teaching and learning environment. Without having meaningful conversations with them and capturing their experiences, the research would be incomplete.

### **Research Participants**

Four Dalit and three non-Dalit students from Grades 9 and 10 participated in this study. Similarly, three teachers, the head teacher, and the chair of SMC also participated in the research along with two parents. The three Dalit students have been coded as Ajay, Bijay, Sanjay, and Manjay. They shared their everyday school experiences, including classroom interaction, participation, and moments of silence, with the researcher. Among the participants, two were male, and two were female to maintain gender balance.

Similarly, three non-Dalit students were included as participants to understand how caste was viewed by non-Dalits in the same school. Students coded as Mohan, Rohan, and Sohan discussed their friendships with Dalit students, friendly banter among friends, groupism, and their views on discrimination. Among the non-Dalit too, gender balance was considered.

Likewise, three teachers, teaching different subjects at different levels in the school, took part in the study. Coded as Sachin, Rachin, and Asin shared their observations of student behaviors, their classroom practices, and overall school

discipline. Their views helped me understand how they perceive caste, their biases, and their understanding of inclusion.

Furthermore, the SMC Chair and the headteacher also served as key informants, with whom I conducted in-depth interviews. They spoke about school management and their roles, diversity and discipline in the school, and the challenges they face in addressing caste- and religion-based discrimination on school premises. Their perspective gave an idea of how caste-related issues are handled at the school.

Lastly, parents from both Dalit and non-Dalit backgrounds were interviewed. Parents 1 and 2 shared their views on caste, day-to-day practices, traditions, and education. Their perspective helped to understand how home, family, and community beliefs influence children's school experiences.

Some informal conversations also took place during the researcher's stay at the school. In addition to formal interviews, informal conversations were held with some students who have been coded as ND, SD, etc. I had an informal talk with different groups of participants—students, teachers, school management committee members, and parents. These informal conversations helped me get an overall picture of the caste-based discrimination in the school and how community practices actively influenced the school's environment. 16 participants from diverse backgrounds, together, participated in the study, both formally and informally.

### **Field Work**

With the intention of gaining an in-depth understanding of school life and how caste operates within such institutions, I began my fieldwork within the school, not merely as an outsider. As an ethnographer, it was important for me to observe people in their natural, everyday settings. My focus was on understanding how caste operates in schools and how caste prejudices and discrimination are formed. Furthermore, I wanted to dig deeper into how caste, as a social factor, persisted in daily interactions, actions, and even in moments of silence. Instead of starting with fixed ideas, assumptions, and a set of prepared questions, I tried to learn by watching them, listening to participants, and spending time in the school.

I started my fieldwork in November and continued for about 1.5 months. During this period, I visited the school almost every day. As anticipated, it was not easy to communicate with people at first. Teachers and students were unsure about my identity and my purpose of visit. Some teachers even refused to give interviews, and some immediately avoided my calls. This made me realize that winning their trust

would not be easy, and I needed to put more effort into it and spend more time with them to gain their confidence.

Most of my time was spent observing classrooms, sitting in the staff room, and having informal conversations with teachers and students. Gradually, people became familiar with my presence, and conversations began to happen and flow more naturally.

I conducted focused, in-depth interviews to collect detailed data. I also taught a few classes to build relationships with students, observed some classes, and closely observed daily school routines. This regular presence helped me understand school life in ways that formal interviews alone could not have.

Spending regular time with teachers and students in school allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of caste-related behaviors, their social impacts, and relationships in public spaces such as school. It helped me see patterns that are usually hidden, taken for granted, or simply ignored. These insights were important for understanding discrimination in schools and for deliberating possible ways to combat this social evil.

### **Meaning-Making Process**

The data analysis process began with transcribing and codifying the information, then grouping the codes by theme, and finally categorizing them to produce a more complete picture. Finally, the categorized themes were interpreted (Ngulube, 2015). As a critical ethnographer, I documented this process of meaning-making by transcribing and codifying the material and organizing it into various themes. Since I used a critical ethnography research paradigm, I critically examined the data throughout the meaning-making process.

For data collection, interviews were conducted in Nepali, and both questions and answers were immediately translated as needed to ensure the meaning remained true to the original. The thematic analysis, based on critical theory as presented in the research proposal, will identify patterns of discrimination, power relations, and intersectional elements (e.g., caste in relation to religion, gender, and socioeconomic status). Inductively derived themes were based on repeatedly coding transcripts, cross-checking with other groups of participants, and triangulating with field notes. To promote comprehensiveness and comparability, results are categorized into six broad themes and sub-themes, as needed. The themes include direct quotations to be authentic, comparative analysis between groups of participants (e.g., authority figures

vs. students, Dalit vs. non-Dalit perspectives), and limited analytical comments on implications with no significant interpretation. To present data effectively, important comparisons and enumerations are summarized in a table.

### **Quality Standards**

The quality of ethnographic research depends on whether it honestly presents participants' real experiences and whether those experiences are understood in depth. In this study, I followed established qualitative standards to make the findings trustworthy, ethical, and meaningful. Maintaining research quality required me to follow a careful, unbiased approach throughout the research process.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four important criteria for quality in qualitative research. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Later, Treharne and Riggs (2017) also added authenticity as another important criterion. In this study, I sought to maintain quality in line with these standards (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Treharne & Riggs, 2017).

Credibility refers to whether the research accurately reflects participants' real-life experiences. I maintained credibility by spending a long time at the school to understand the lived experiences of students and teachers. I followed the established guidelines and standards of critical ethnography. I engaged in the research field- the selected school- for a prolonged period- almost one and a half months, and observed classrooms, students-teachers interaction, students-students interaction, and the school's authorities' behaviors both formally and informally. I collected data through interviews, observations, and field notes. Using different sources helped me understand the same issue from different angles (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability means whether the findings may be useful in other similar settings. This study does not claim that the results apply everywhere. However, I provided detailed descriptions of the research process, the school context, the community, and the social relationships, which help readers and researchers make their own judgment on whether the findings are important and contextual to their own context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability means clarity and consistency of the research process. I have described the research design in detail, including how I collected the data and analyzed them to ensure dependability. I also kept reflexive notes to record how my understanding changed during the research process (Carspecken, 1996). I followed a consistent, systematic approach in analyzing the data.

Confirmability means that the findings are based on participants' experiences rather than my personal opinions. I reflected on my own position and continuously checked whether my assumptions were influencing the analysis (Madison, 2012). I ensured my interpretations were clearly linked to the actual data. I also worked carefully to ensure authenticity by analyzing the data critically instead of imposing my own beliefs or biases. Through these steps, I tried to maintain the overall quality and integrity of this research.

### **My Standpoint**

As a critical ethnographer, I approached this research with the understanding that social reality is complex and shaped by historical, cultural, economic, political, and gendered phenomena. I acknowledged multiple and intersecting realities, particularly in the context of caste-based discrimination in schools. Knowledge, in this study, was understood as socially constructed and co-created through continued engagement with participants, involving understanding and reflection on their practices, beliefs, and experiences. Guided by critical theory, this study aimed not only to identify and describe inequality but also to challenge it and promote social justice in educational institutions, such as schools, and, eventually, in society. I used an intersectional methodology to examine how caste, gender, class, and other social factors intersect to produce multi-level and varied experiences of marginalization.

As an outsider to the groups that often face discrimination, I brought an outsider perspective to describe and critically analyze the discriminatory practices observed. I represent an elite and comparatively advantaged caste group, the Tarai Brahmin, with family histories often involved in discriminatory practices. As a researcher from a dominant caste background, I understand that my social position influenced both my access to the field and how I understood participants' experiences. This required me to engage in self-reflection and maintain a self-critical stance throughout the research. At times, my identity created some distance between me and Dalit participants. However, I was aware of these power differences and tried to build trust through continuous interaction and engagement. This positionality obliged me to acknowledge my privilege, question my biases, and approach the study with humility and ethical responsibility.

### **Research Ethics**

The core principles of research ethics were followed to ensure integrity, morality, fairness, honesty, conscience, and respect in the research process. These

guidelines were intended to avoid causing harm to participants and were considered at all stages of the research, from gaining approval to concluding the study (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009). Ethical considerations were guided by my ontological and epistemological positions. As a critical theory researcher, I focused on people's values and their links to discrimination while adhering to the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence throughout this study (Sobočan et al., 2019).

To ensure ethical conduct, I did not reveal any details that could identify the school where the study was conducted and maintained the anonymity of all participants. I ensured I did not blame any particular caste or community throughout the study and instead focused on broader structural conditions. My approach was to discuss issues concerning rather than individuals or groups. During the study, I maintained the utmost respect for others' values while upholding my own ethical stance, and I followed the university's ethical requirements throughout the research process.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter covers the methodological foundation of the study. In the philosophical assumption section, I have explained my ontological belief and epistemological view. I believe that reality is socially constructed and experienced differently by different individuals. In my view, knowledge is created through interaction between the researcher and participants. I have also explained the use of the critical theory paradigm and why I have used critical ethnography as research methodology. Critical ethnography has enabled me to examine power relations and everyday practices of caste-based discrimination in schools.

The chapter also described the research design, including the selection of the research site in Janakpur Sub-metropolitan City. I have explained the process of entering the field and the strategies I used to build trust with participants. I have also explained the selection of research participants and the data collection process.

Finally, in this chapter, I explained the data analysis process, quality standards, my positionality, and the ethical considerations maintained throughout the study.

## CHAPTER IV MANIFESTATION OF CASTE

### **Everyday Caste in School**

This chapter presents the findings of the ethnographic research on caste-based discrimination prevalent in a community school in Janakpur Sub-metropolitan, Dhanusha, Nepal. Data collection was completed through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including students, teachers, SMC members, and school parents. The research questions have guided the analysis: How does caste-based discrimination manifest in schools, and what are the lived experiences of Dalit students?

Instead of creating a predetermined set of categories, inductively, the themes emerge from the data: subtle and indirect discrimination, normalization of caste references, teacher biases, students' experiences, and self-segregation.

#### **Everyday Caste in School: Rhetoric vs Reality in School Diversity**

All participants I discussed during my study acknowledged that the school was socially diverse and catered to people from various social strata. However, their understanding of diversity differed in depth and emphasis, revealing implicit assumptions about equality and inclusion.

The SMC Chair framed diversity in positive and ideological terms, emphasizing equality as a guiding principle and an ideal situation that needs to be achieved. He stated, *"I support the idea that school is free from any sort of discrimination. School is equal for everyone, regardless of caste or class. Therefore, I want to encourage everyone to be respectful and equal to all others."*

He further connected this belief to the broader role of education in achieving a discrimination-free society, *"Education will break the chain of discrimination,"* said the headteacher. *"And this is why there should be equal treatment for everyone at the school."*

Contrary to the headteacher, other teachers provided more descriptive accounts of diversity. Sachin explained diversity in terms of the school's social composition by listing different caste and religious groups, *"My school comprises a diverse set of students who include Tarai Brahmin to Tarai Dalit with Muslims, Tarai Indigenous, skill-based caste, and business caste."*

Asin also acknowledged diversity, but used noticeably critical language: *This school is also diverse because there are so-called high caste students and so-called lower caste. The school has students from two religions: Hindu and Muslim. So, it is heterogeneous on religious grounds as well. Gender is obvious as this is the co-ed school.*

The teacher's use of phrases such as “so-called high caste” and “so-called lower caste” suggests that the teacher is uncomfortable with caste hierarchies and is also conscious of this social stratum. However, the teacher is not critical of how caste operates within the school; rather, they are politically critical.

Rachin understands diversity in a plain and simple form, lacking a deep understanding of caste categories, and their dynamics, *“There is diversity in school. There are students with various backgrounds attending here. They are Brahmin, all Dalit, Hindu, and Muslim.”*

While teachers described the presence of diverse social or caste groups in the school, Rachin spoke only about categories, and Asin discussed it critically. However, none of them acknowledge the existence of power and influence. They didn't clearly address cultural and caste-based dominance or how these factors operate within the school. So, it is evident that understanding caste diversity differs across people in the same school, which is also incomplete and problematic.

### **Student Perspectives on Groupism and Discomfort**

In contrast to institutional claims that “everyone is equal,” students described starkly uneven experiences of daily school life. Non-Dalit students justified student segregation in the most benign-sounding terms, stressing personal choice, common interests, and neighborhood affiliations, while noting that upper-caste students tended to stick together. However, Dalit students have a different understanding and experience. Ajay stated, *“My class has many problems. The school has some discrimination. Not all the teachers treat all the students the same way.”*

Whereas Rohan explained the practice of social groupism among students, *“Students form groups consisting of other students who are comfortable with one another. They make groups sometimes based on their locality or where they come from.”*

Such a framing makes self-segregation an effective, voluntary choice: individuals tend to migrate towards those with whom they are comfortable. But in

contrast, Manjay described, “There are some upper caste students who think they are superior. They remain in the group of their own caste.”

These experiences reveal that groupism within the school manifests in two ways: one grouping occurs based on familiarity, background, and comfort among students, and the other occurs through interactions among students representing different identities.

This shows the paradox: on the one hand, it is a neutral, universal human tendency among people who feel comfortable; on the other hand, it is directly connected to caste superiority. The comfort explanation is a socially acceptable excuse that masks the underlying caste reasoning. This is misrecognition, in Bourdieu’s language: the structural reproduction of hierarchy occurs and is characterized as an innocent preference.

### **Socioeconomic Homogeneity Amid Diversity**

Asin also brings the socioeconomic dimension into the discussion of diversity and challenges the limited understanding of key topics. He said:

*In terms of class, I cannot say that it is diverse because there are so many students of the same economic class that study in this school. You know that those studying in government schools are largely from poor economic classes.*

According to the same teacher, most students in government schools come from weak economic backgrounds. This takes class as a dimension of diversity and shows that understanding diversity only on the basis of caste and religion is incomplete. The teacher’s observations are similar to the headteacher’s, as he noted that the parents of most students work as daily wage laborers. He told this researcher, “*Look at the nearby daily wage labor market, and you will find almost 75% of them are the parents of my students.*”

This observation suggests that although students differ by caste and religion, most have similar economic backgrounds, making them representative of the same group when viewed through the lens of economic class. Therefore, understanding diversity only through caste and religion remains incomplete.

While the SMC, the school governing body, chair acknowledges the diversity in the school, he stresses the need for organizational efforts to maintain diversity through inclusion, “*We visit each household of each caste group and request them to send their children to school. If we start discriminating, they will not send their children to our school.*”

This reflects institutional optimism and confidence in achieving equality-oriented practices in public spaces such as community schools. However, one cannot deny the ground reality within the school walls. Students' experiences indicate that caste status still continues to shape interactions within the school, even when enrollment is inclusive.

Overall, authority figures presented diversity as something that could be addressed through fairness and equal treatment, whereas students highlighted everyday groupism and discomfort that they witnessed and experienced. These contrasting perspectives are summarized in Table 1. Summary of perceptions.

**Table 1**

*Socio-Economic Homogeneity and Diversity*

<b>Participant Group</b>	<b>Key Perception of Diversity</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
SMC Chair	Ideological equality across castes	"Everyone is equal in the school irrespective of their caste and class."
Teachers	Quantified caste/religious mix with socioeconomic uniformity	"Government schools mainly have students from economically disadvantaged groups." Asin
Dalit Students	Superiority complex amid diversity	"Some upper caste students think they are superior." Sanjay
Non-Dalit Students	Groupism based on comfort/interests	"Groupism takes place based on interest." (Mohan)

### **Observed and Experienced Forms of Discrimination**

Discrimination in the school appeared in both overt and covert forms and was often intensified by tensions in the wider community.

#### **Overt Discrimination and Slurs**

Overt discrimination is manifested in multiple ways. It is expressed through abuse, slurs, derogatory remarks, as well as through practices and interactions that may make others feel inferior or disgusted. Teachers see it as problematic, but

students see it as harmless fun. Only a few students raised questions about the practice and called it inappropriate.

I recall an incident when I saw students calling each other using abusive words. When I was going to the toilet, a group of students was standing nearby, having a conversation. One student asked, "*Saala, why didn't you come to play cricket in the evening?*" Before the other student could reply, he saw me. All of them felt embarrassed and ran towards their class.

My observation is backed by Asin's experience. The teacher admitted the prevalence of peer-based verbal abuse as similar to my observation. "*It is peers who are more discriminating and use the caste-based slurs. They do not address each other by name, instead by caste,*" the teacher added. They also adopt inappropriate and abusive language in referring to each other.

Non-Dalit and Dalit students perceive such practices differently, as their experiences differ too. Rohan described such language as teasing, "*Sometimes friends can banter. They refer to girls as Dominiya. Sometimes Mushaharni. (Casteist slurs)*"

Although framed as joking, Sohan acknowledged its harmful nature, "*This is wrong behavior. It is not acceptable to demean anyone based on their caste.*" Bijay described it as a lack of discipline. "*There is no discipline in this school; students abuse each other. I don't like it,*" which shows his awareness and impact. However, his voice is weak. He also shared a painful interaction with a teacher: the incident was not related to the school where he is currently studying, but to one he attended before.

*There was one teacher, and I had requested some help. He got angry with me, and he began scolding me. He told me that a Dalit's son like me cannot do anything and only remains a Dalit, despite whatever they do in life.*

The incident emotionally hurt him and shattered the student's confidence, leaving him upset for many days. However, he didn't complain about it, fearing further consequences and his helplessness. "*What would I do with the complaint?*" the student questioned back. "*He was a teacher, and I was just a student.*"

Incidents like this prove the power hierarchy and how those in power are involved in practicing discrimination against those inferior to them. This is also a classic example of symbolic domination: the dominated are supposed to take the insult without complaint, and the lack of complaint is, in turn, used to demonstrate that the insult was not harmful.

These incidents once again indicate that the use of abusive language and casteist slurs is very common in schools. And it is also important to understand the power structure behind it. So, the question is “who can make such casteist slurs and abuses”, and “who are these caste-based or discriminatory abuses aimed at?”

And the answer is simple, as such practices are outright discrimination aimed at Dalits, but the school treats such malpractices as something very normal. The hidden power structure, which is the root cause, is not given attention.

### **Subtle and Sneaky Discrimination**

Clear and visible acts of discrimination are easier to notice and counter. However, subtle forms of discrimination are often not seen as they occur in a stealthy manner. As a result, in many cases, discrimination goes unnoticed and unreported. However, they are routine and normal in everyday school life. It is often not necessary for such acts of bias to be performed intentionally; at times, they occur unconsciously, yet they still strengthen the social hierarchy. Because the understanding of subtle discrimination is varied, the response of the School Management Committee Chair sounds unclear on this issue. He said, *“I cannot say that there is no discrimination here, but to a large extent, we have maintained a discrimination-free school environment.”*

This statement accepts that discrimination may exist but also views it as casual and regular. The phrase “to a large extent” presents discrimination as something trivial or negligible.

But the situation differs from the one claimed, as evident in Teachers’ experiences. Sachin shared incidents such as refusing water from a Dalit student, *“The teacher said, ‘No, I have not asked you, but her,’ meaning a non-Dalit girl student.”*

This was a clear case of caste-based discrimination towards a Dalit student. Another example was related to food at a Muslim teacher’s home. The so-called upper caste teacher would be furious. He said, *“To rid myself of this sin (eating at a Muslim teacher’s house), I must take a dip in the holy Ganges River.”*

This incident reflects the fundamental caste logic of purity and impurity, where acts that seem ordinary are transformed into moral judgments about ritual status (Dumont, 1980). The phenomenon that appears to be a personal preference may be an internalized social script that regulates interaction.

From the experiences of Dalit students, it becomes clear how these subtle behaviors affect them emotionally. Dalit Student 1 said, *“Not explicitly, but at times*

*they favor upper caste students because they believe upper caste students are smarter than others (Dalit students)."*

Bijay shared how his non-Dalit friend avoids entering his house, "*My non-Dalit friend tends to visit my place to get class notes. But she never came into my house.*" The student added, saying, "*She stands outside but never comes inside. She belongs to a higher caste.*"

Such practices only show that caste-based discrimination does not always appear as direct exclusion but as unequal assumptions. Such behavior affects students' confidence and their relationships with school and their friends. When I asked why she did not enter the house, Bijay could not clearly explain the reason, "*I don't know why she doesn't come inside. Maybe it's because she is from a higher caste.*"

I then asked whether it was because of caste or because she was a girl, trying to look at the issue from a gender lens. The student, once again, did not have a clear answer. "*It could be because of both reasons,*" the student replied.

Here, not entering the house could also be due to gender, but this does not mean caste has no role. Instead of viewing caste and gender separately, it is important to understand how they interact. The intersectionality of caste and gender is mutually reinforcing. Discrimination based on caste and gender often makes them stronger. In the Indian subcontinent, especially in Hindu society, the practice of not allowing someone to enter the house or limiting entry has historically been linked to ideas of caste purity and impurity (Guru, 1995). This incident could also be another manifestation of that deeply rooted idea of purity and impurity. So, even if gender may have had some influence here, we cannot deny that caste could be the main reason for the maintained distance.

The participants' responses show that there are different understandings of discrimination among school authorities, teachers, and students. The School Management Committee Chair accepts that discrimination may exist, but he presents it as something small. Whereas teachers and students explained discrimination as everyday activities. School authorities minimize or overlook the problem in order to present the school as inclusive; on the other hand, they point out everyday behaviors such as avoidance, unequal treatment, and assumptions about Dalit students' abilities as discriminatory practices. This difference between institutional claims and students' lived experiences shows how discrimination continues in schools without being recognized or addressed.

### Intersection with Religion and Community Conflicts

Among the participants, almost everyone also addressed religious discrimination. Caste and religion are not only identities or social structures but also an intersectional identity that has become part of everyday school life.

Religious conflicts were clearly visible in school. Teachers, students, and even the SMC discuss the religious issues the school is facing. The immediate reason was the recent conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the community; however, as Muslims are also considered 'untouchables' by Hindu groups and treated as Dalits, this phenomenon is also important to be discussed.

Asin remarked, *"In my school, there is another discrimination. And that is the discrimination between Hindu and Muslim. These two communities had conflicts, and the tension is evident at the school too."*

The teacher explained that Hindu–Muslim tensions in the community also appear in the school, showing that the school is not separate from society but carries back the social structure of the community to the school premises. This is also reflected in Mohan's statement. He said, *"There are conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims in our village. Thus, the environment is also not very comfortable in my school at times."*

For Muslim students, the school had not been a fully safe or neutral space free from racial or religious tension going on outside. Asin understood this but maintained silence and didn't speak about it. *"Outside tension affects the environment of the school, and Muslim students don't feel comfortable."* She shared. Similar to her view, the headteacher also described the situation, providing examples that more than 250 students have left the school after the conflict, and many of them were Muslim students studying at the primary level. *"I have observed that some of the students have dropped out or have gone to another school, particularly from the Muslim community, after the Hindu-Muslim tension."* However, I noticed the 'blaming the victim' phenomenon was prevalent, with teachers blaming students rather than working to minimize inequality.

Sachin said, *"Muslim students also stand in the line for morning assembly, but they do not pray. This is because of their religion."*

Rachin blamed that *"Muslim girls don't want to study"* and the head teacher also stressed that *"parents are not educated, and they don't know the importance of education. So, they don't ask their children to study."*

Summing this up, what can be said is that Muslim students, particularly girls, are facing intersectional and layered discrimination.

Another factor was inclusiveness, as I observed that the values were not put into practice. As many Studies have shown, here too it was evident that, even though schools claimed to be empathetic and neutral, they were, in subtle ways, promoting the practices of dominant groups. The morning assembly can be taken as an example as it is a Hindu practice and the Hindu goddess '*Saraswati*' is worshiped in the prayer, but it is expected that Muslim student too offers the prayers against their religious values. The third factor is 'otherization'. The majority treat minorities as others, and that differential treatment is also a kind of discrimination. Here, even though Muslim students take part in the prayer, they are still marked as "different" (Nambissan, 2013). Although this practice was seen as respecting their religion and supporting inclusiveness, it still shows religious differences have sneaked into daily school routines.

Participants' responses reveal different understandings of the issue. Some participants recognized that Hindu–Muslim tensions in the community also affect the school environment. This shows that schools are closely connected with the wider society. However, some teachers blamed Muslim students or their families instead of reflecting on themselves and school practices. For example, they said Muslim girls do not want to study or that parents do not value education. Such views shift responsibility to the community and ignore possible discrimination within the school. At the same time, practices like Hindu-based morning assembly show how the values of the dominant group are treated as normal. Even when Muslim students are allowed to participate differently, they are still seen as "different." This shows that religious differences quietly shape everyday school life.

### **Unconscious Biases and their Manifestation in Interactions**

Bijay shared his lived experience. Once in class, there was an informal debate on a caste-related topic, and he argued that the Brahminical structure was responsible for social discrimination. When he finished sharing his view, the teacher, a Brahmin, became angry.

The teacher said, "*Brahmins were never illiterate, that is why they are ahead even today. Dalits do not study, so they remain behind.*"

The student said, "*I felt bullied. I could not even speak.*"

This incident shows that teachers carry unconscious bias with them, and even a healthy debate on casteism or caste-related atrocities is not welcome. Teachers - those in power- use words to remind one again that caste is not only a legacy, but a horizon: a fixed boundary on what one can be is reinforcement of caste fate. Teachers, who should be at the forefront of combating casteism, carry caste pride. The idea that Dalits do not study is deeply rooted in their thinking, which can be termed as internalized Brahmanical superiority and deficit thinking (Velencia, 1997).

Asin also supported this view. She explained the most common prejudice among teachers in this way, *“The most common prejudice is that Dalit students do not want to study.”*

She connected the same thinking with Muslim students and said that teachers commonly believe, *“He/she is a Muslim student and they do not study.”*

These statements may sound like personal opinions, but they shape how teachers behave and treat students in school every day. When students are labelled as “not wanting to study,” teachers are less likely to support them, pay attention to them, ask them questions, or believe in their abilities. A teacher who is aware of unconscious bias may try to change their behavior. But a teacher who is not aware of unconscious bias will not try to change at all and may not even see such preconceived bias as a problem.

For example, Asin said that she tries to use inclusive teaching practices. In contrast, Rachin strongly claimed that he had no bias in his one-sentence answer. *“I have no bias.”*

This statement shows that he does not understand what unconscious bias actually means. While talking with Rachin, I felt that he also had many unconscious biases. He strongly believed that Dalit students have more household work, so they cannot study well, which was nothing but his bigotry towards those students.

Sachin gave a more honest response. He said, *“I do not know what unconscious bias is.”*

Not knowing is better than claiming to have no bias at all. Teachers often try to present themselves as fair and neutral. Saying *“I have no bias”* or *“I do not discriminate”* is also problematic because it closes the door to self-reflection, unlearning, and undoing past wrongs. The teachers' responses show that they have different understandings of unconscious bias. Some teachers recognize their prejudice, whereas some teachers outright reject it. For example, Asin recognized that

she might have prejudice and tried to reflect on her teaching practices, whereas Rachin strongly denied having any bias. His denial suggests a lack of understanding about how unconscious bias works. Sachin's response, in which he acknowledged that he is not aware of unconscious bias, shows his honesty and puts him in a good position to learn and reflect. These different responses indicate that many teachers may have hidden beliefs about Dalit and Muslim students without realizing that they are biased.

### **Dalit Experiences within Discipline and Academic Life**

Dalit students complained that they were discriminated against when opportunities were given. Ajay felt insecure about how students were selected for extracurricular activities. She said, *"Sometimes they handpick upper caste students, and they also give preference to boys. I once spoke to a teacher when I wasn't chosen to compete. They said they would keep me next time."*

This is a prime example of unequal selection and unfair treatment. This shows that discrimination is not limited to daily behavior but also extends to the distribution of available opportunities.

Imagine a teacher looking around the room for people to represent their district in a quiz or poetry recital. Their eyes linger on the Brahmin boys in the front row, whose names are called first for practice sessions. People who are Dalit, like her, aren't directly told "no." They might even be allowed to join in sometimes, but the pattern is clear: upper-caste peers are thought to be "smart," more polished, and more deserving of attention. This is an example of microaggression as described by Sue (2010), which may be individually small but structurally powerful. The teacher may not perceive a Dalit student as non-leadership material.

Here, discrimination does not appear as punishment, but as an intentional act of depriving people of opportunities and not giving equal chances to grow and learn due to their caste identities. Opportunities such as competitions, representation, or participation in programs outside the school are important for building students' confidence and their overall development.

Poverty played a crucial role in the life of Bijay as he had to change his schools. He couldn't afford the fee, so he transferred from a private school to a public one. He said, *"Because of poverty, I had to change my school... This school also lacks teachers."*

Teachers often justified the low academic performance of Dalit students by pointing to external factors such as poverty, family responsibilities, lack of parental support, or irregular attendance at school. While these factors are important, they cannot hide the institutional weaknesses within the school. The shortage of teachers and dedicated academic support to non-performing Dalit students, lack of a competitive learning environment, and unequal access to opportunities continue to weaken the learning experiences of Dalit students.

The analysis of the response shows that there are two layers of discrimination in school: behavioral and access to opportunities. Ajay's experience suggests that opportunities are not always distributed equally, and upper-caste students are often preferred. At the same time, teachers blame poverty for the low academic performance of Dalit students. Poverty, or a low economic background, may influence students' learning; however, such excuses of teachers are highly likely to shift attention away from institutional problems.

**Table 2**

*Factors Affecting Dalit Students' Academic Experiences*

<b>Factor Category</b>	<b>Specific Factors</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Implications for Discrimination</b>
Socioeconomic	Poverty, sibling care, early marriage	Teacher 1, Teacher 3	Intersects with caste to limit access
Familial	Parental unawareness, irregular attendance	Teacher 3, Teacher 2	Reinforces marginalization
Institutional	Teacher shortages, lack of competition	Dalit Student 2	Perpetuates inequities in school environment
Discrimination-Related	Perceived inferiority, service unavailability	Dalit Student 1, Teacher 3	Direct impact on self-efficacy

These aspects demonstrate that there is a nexus between caste discrimination and structural obstacles where socioeconomic vulnerabilities are enhanced by

institutional deficiency, which eventually impedes the academic experiences of Dalit students.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have tried to answer Research Question 1 by presenting the findings and analysis from the fieldwork. I have shown that, although school authorities and teachers express their commitment to equality, inclusion, and diversity, this commitment remains largely at the rhetorical and ideological level. In practice, caste-based discrimination continues to exist in both overt and subtle forms in the school. Teachers and school authorities have a limited understanding of diversity, as they mainly see it as the presence of different caste, religious, and social groups. Deeper issues related to power, dominance, and privilege connected to caste identities are largely left undiscussed.

I have also discussed Dalit students' lived experiences, which reveal unequal treatment, discomfort, and exclusion within classrooms and peer interactions.

I have also explained how overt discrimination surfaces in everyday school life. Overt discrimination appears through caste-based slurs, verbal abuse, and derogatory language, which are often normalized by saying that these are just jokes or teasing among friends. On the other hand, subtle forms of discrimination usually go unnoticed, but their impact on Dalit students is very strong. Subtle and covert discrimination happens daily in the school through practices such as unequal attention from teachers and biased assumptions about Dalit students.

I have also explained the intersection of caste and religion. In the context of Madhesh, caste-based discrimination strongly intersects with religion, shaping students' everyday experiences in school.

CHAPTER V  
REPRODUCTION OF DISCRIMINATION: INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES,  
SILENCE, AND POWER

In this chapter, I have analyzed how caste-based discrimination continues and is reproduced within schools. In the previous chapter, I explained the direct experiences of Dalit students. In this chapter, I have focused on the institutional mechanisms and relationships that sustain discrimination, both explicitly and implicitly. Based on the evidence collected, I have analyzed the issue in light of Social Reproduction Theory and Social Exclusion Theory.

**Institutional Measures to Combat Caste-Based Discrimination**

The SMC Chair explained the informal preventive measure:

*The school does not take any particular measures. I simply requested that all the teachers who do not commit any such act that I will have to respond to them in the community... When we lead by example, other people are bound to do the same.*

He emphasized active interventions in the case of community conflicts:

*There was a quarrel between Hindu and a Muslim in the village... I, along with the teachers, visited every household and requested them to enroll their children in school. I told them that school is open to everyone and that no one would be discriminated against on any basis.*

Teachers found large institutional loopholes. Asin criticized that there are no formal systems to deal with caste-based discrimination or hatred against any caste, *“The school does not speak about such issues. The school does not have a complaint box. Nor has any Grievance Hearing Officer been appointed. Students do not have any support system either. A child club hasn't been formed.”*

She appreciated the house visits by SMC but suggested continued action plans, *“SMC should make it an agenda point to discuss in meetings, and they should record the progress.”*

Sachin acknowledged the lack of a complaint box as well as the absence of Dalit representatives in dealing with caste-related issues, *“In our school, there are no Dalit representatives. The SMC has no Dalit community members.”*

Meanwhile, students provided useful recommendations. Ajay was in support of this, “*All students need to be treated equally and given equal opportunities.*” Bijay focused on policy implementation: “*There are numerous policies in the school. There is a code of conduct, too. Then, only when that happens (code of conduct followed), will many issues be solved.*” Non-Dalit students did not discuss measures directly but suggested normalizing the issues. The SMC Chair suggested more general solutions:

*The main issue is with parents. In case they are aware, it will be limited. The discriminators must be educated, counseled, and sensitized. In case they continue any discriminatory acts, then the final remedy is to punish them according to the law.*

Teachers, students, and members of the School Management Committee (SMC) have discussed efforts to make the school inclusive, but there is no clear, formal system in place to address discrimination. This shows a big gap between intention and reality. When religious conflict happened in the village, teachers going door to door to bring students back to school was a good effort, but such actions are usually temporary and depend on the situation. For real solutions, the school needs a complaint system, a responsible person to hear complaints, an active child club, and an inclusive SMC, but the school seems silent on these issues.

### **Comparative Analysis Across Participant Groups**

The SMC, the school's governing body, and teachers were primarily concerned with informal, reactive actions rather than sustainable solutions, whereas the students were primarily concerned with the application of existing policies. A lack of accountability on the part of school authorities appears to be a gap here.

**Table 3**

*Existing Measures and Recommendations*

<b>Measure/Recommendation</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Alignment with RQ</b>
Informal Warnings	SMC Chair	Verbal directives to teachers	Administrative address
Household Visits	Asin, SMC Chair	Outreach during conflicts	Proactive engagement

Complaint Box (Absent/Unused)	Asin, Sachin	Lack of formal grievance systems	Institutional perpetuation
Policy Enforcement	Bijay	Adherence to code of conduct	Improving lived experiences
Education and Legal Punishment	SMC Chair	Sensitization and enforcement	Structural reforms

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The reliance on informal means and the lack of formal means and representation accentuate institutional factors that enable discrimination to persist, despite administrative motivations.

### **Ideological Commitment to Equality**

When talking to anyone at the school, an ideological commitment to equality is evident. The Chair of the School Management Committee asserted a strong commitment to combat discrimination and to equality. In his words, *“Everyone in the school is equal regardless of caste and class.”*

Similarly, the headteacher also vocally spoke against caste-based discrimination. However, he also acknowledged that discrimination exists within the school, even though he described it as covert and difficult to manage. Both school leaders expressed, at a theoretical level, that the school should promote equality. But from their statements, it becomes clear that their understanding of equality remains limited to an ideological and symbolic level.

The SMC’s failure to develop any mechanism to prevent discrimination is a clear reason for this. Likewise, there is no formal system at the school for registering complaints of caste-based discrimination, nor is there any designated person or mechanism responsible for hearing such complaints and taking action.

Asin also confirmed this. During my observations, I did not see any complaint box anywhere on the school premises. Another important issue that cannot be ignored is the lack of representation from the Dalit community on the School Management Committee. Sachin clearly stated, *“There are no members from the Dalit community in the SMC.”*

When I asked the headteacher about this issue, he explained that the groups that hold dominance in the local community are the ones that usually get representation. This shows that he understands power-relations in society, but no

effort has been made to change this situation, at least in the school, giving much-needed representation and voices to underrepresented groups like Dalits.

This absence is not just a simple fact, but a sign of a deeper structural problem in every institution of society. When Dalit voices are missing from decision-making spaces, their experiences, suffering, and specific needs do not receive institutional attention and support. In this way, the lack of representation makes the power balance within the school one-sided and further strengthens institutional inequality.

The absence of complaints does not mean there is no discrimination. However, it appears that the school administration takes the absence of complaints as proof that discrimination does not exist. The SMC Chair said:

*I monitor myself personally. I listen to their grievances and issues and try to resolve them. I hold monthly meetings with all the teachers. Teachers meet with students frequently. I visit the school regularly. I sometimes visit classrooms too and discuss with students if they have any issues. They indicate whether teachers are not regularly attending school, are not taking classes, or are behind in their courses. I discuss it with teachers and ask them to attend class regularly and complete their course on time. I haven't heard any complaints about caste-based discrimination in school personally, so there is no discussion about this issue so far. However, if an issue arises, I shall discuss it.*

A similar view was also shared by the headteacher. He said:

*If you have observed, I am very friendly with my students. They love me, and I also treat them as my own kids. I interact with them almost every day and listen to their grievances. Sometimes they complain about classes, sports equipment, and sometimes even about toilet cleaning. But the issue of caste-based discrimination has never been heard.*

Both emphasized that no formal complaints related to caste-based discrimination had been received to date. For them, the absence of complaints seemed to be proof that discrimination was minimal or nonexistent. As noted by Nambissan (2013), the absence of complaints does not indicate the absence of discrimination, as marginalized students may feel unsafe or lack the confidence to report such experiences. In hierarchical institutions like schools, silence should not be treated as evidence that “everything is fine”; instead, institutions must be held accountable for creating safe and responsive mechanisms to address discrimination.

The headteacher though, accepted that discrimination might exist, but such complaints have not reached him so far, *“There may be discrimination, but students haven’t shared it with me. This may be because they don’t want to pursue the issue. They know how hard I am working for them.”*

Silence is often connected with fear, lack of trust, and a need for safety. When students feel helpless or are not being heard, they simply do not complain or refrain from taking the matter to the concerned authorities. Taking silence as a sign that “everything is fine” is dangerous. It does not challenge existing power structures; instead, it helps to maintain them (Guru, 2009).

Students often don't complain because they feel that complaining about such incidents won't make any difference. This is evident in narratives of Dalit and Muslim students. SD said:

*Why should we complain about small issues that took place among friends? We live together, eat together, play together, and study together. Sometimes these things happen,” the student told me. “Even if I complain, what will change? I have Brahmin friends too, and they are good. Only one or two are a bit different.*

This also shows that one reason students do not complain is that they do not want unnecessary troubles among their friends or in school. (Bourdieu, 1991) describes it as the sign of symbolic violence. He argues that when discrimination is subtle and routine, students may not see it as something worth reporting. This normalization weakens resistance and encourages silence, especially among marginalized groups.

### **Silence as an Institutional Strategy**

Silence seemed to be one of the most powerful institutional practices that supports caste-based discrimination in school. The school mainly uses four strategies to address discrimination. The first strategy is softened voice. Teachers and SMC accept that discrimination exists “in some form,” but most treat it as normal, acknowledging that it is linguistically softened. *“I won’t deny discrimination in school. Teachers also discriminate.”* However, peers are the ones who discriminate more. Teacher 3's remark is an example of a softened voice. The issue of discrimination is often presented as indirect, unintentional, or already resolved.

Another strategy is "displacing responsibility," which is another form of silence. School subtly redirected the responsibility to students, blaming them for

practicing discrimination more than teachers. However, evidence shows that teachers discriminate no less than students. "Some teachers refused to eat food touched by a lower-caste colleague," and " a teacher refused water from a Dalit student and later began carrying her own bottle to avoid 'pollution'" -remarks of Sachin are evidence of practiced discrimination. However, it is normalized. The head teacher is known for such discrimination, yet he normalizes it by saying, *"We ignore one teacher as he is also practicing a priest's job and he has to maintain purity. He is retiring soon as well."* These incidents are not peer teasing. They occur among staff, and that too within a professional space. Yet they did not trigger institutional action; they neither became part of the meeting agenda nor resulted in disciplinary action.

Administrators waited for formal complaints but did not create a system to welcome potential complaints or encourage students to come forward if they ever experienced unpleasant issues. The SMC Chairs remark accepts discrimination but make excuse for not hearing formally. He stated, *"I haven't heard any complaints about caste-based discrimination in school personally, so there is no discussion about this issue so far. However, if an issue arises, I shall discuss it."*

The headteacher similarly explained that discrimination may exist, but without formal complaint or proof, action is difficult, *"I interact with students almost every day and listen to their grievances. Sometimes they complain about class, sometimes about sports equipment, and sometimes about toilet cleaning. But the issue of caste-based discrimination has never been raised."*

So, both members of the school authority claimed there was no complaint of caste-based discrimination, which they explained was the reason they did not act, but the issue is that there is no formal system to raise grievances. Asin openly acknowledged, *"The school does not speak about such issues. The school does not have a complaint box. Nor has any Grievance Hearing Officer been appointed. Students do not have any support system either. A child club hasn't been formed."*

Because of all these practices, an environment is created and sustained in which discrimination is neither named nor questioned, let alone being challenged.

Summing this up, what is observed is that silence is a strategy, and it is governance through non-recognition. The excuse of not hearing any complaints, the absence of a formal mechanism for complaints, the indifference towards discrimination by the teacher towards the teacher or students, and the redirection of responsibility downwards are all strategies the school was practicing. The school's

silence here is protective, as it helps it turn a blind eye to discrimination. If they recognize it, they must confront caste hierarchy, but if they leave it informal, they can preserve collegial "harmony" while normalizing ritual exclusion. Silence stabilizes caste power by preventing conflict from becoming institutional critique.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter answers research question 2 by showing that caste-based discrimination in school is reproduced not through open hostility but through institutional silence, lack of representation, denial of bias, and the normalization of inequality.

The findings also suggest that a strong ideological commitment to equality alone is not enough. What is missing in the school is proactive accountability. There are many factors that help maintain existing power relations, among which silence, denial of bias, and normalization of unequal practices play an important role. This chapter primarily addresses Research Question 2.

## CHAPTER VI

### DALIT STUDENTS' RESPONSES, COPING STRATEGIES, AND RESISTANCE

In this chapter, I have discussed issues related to Research Question 3. In the previous chapters, I analyzed the forms of caste discrimination within schools, how the institution or authority perceives these practices, and how they continue and reproduce discrimination. In this chapter, I explain how Dalit students understand their experiences of caste discrimination, their coping mechanisms, and the resistance practices they adopt within limited social and institutional environments.

From an analytical-ethnographic perspective, Dalit students are not merely passive victims; they also actively resist (Carspecken, 1996; Scott, 1985). This resistance is expressed through silence, self-control, and self-blame in one way, and through resistance and agency in the other. They practice both strategies to adapt to the situation, to evaluate risk, and to assess perceived change ability. Their stories showed a diversity of intentional, adaptive reactions to discriminatory and slow actions they had been subjected to.

#### **Silence and Withdrawal**

##### **Fear and the Need for Safety**

Silence appears to be the most common response among Dalit students whenever they face any unpleasant situation because of their caste. This silence is driven by fear, insecurity, and a sense of risk. Many Dalit students expressed that speaking openly about caste discrimination would not solve the problem but might further exacerbate the situation.

Bijay remained silent when a teacher told him that a Dalit child would always remain Dalit. He said that he was still young and naïve, whereas the teacher was old and learned.

*After the Gen Z movement, once a debate started in our class. I said that Brahmins have always ruled over us. I had read it somewhere. The teacher was also a Brahmin. I did not realize that I said it in front of him... He started defending himself, saying Brahmins were always educated, so they were on top. Dalits never studied. If you do not study, you will remain the same... The incident left me confused, thinking whether he was angry or trying to motivate*

*me to study. But his voice was very loud, and I felt bullied. So, I kept quiet. How could I argue with him? He is so old, and I am so young.*

ND also stayed silent when a teacher refused to give her a water bottle, even though she had seen the same teacher giving water bottles to other students. He was hesitant to speak with me at first, but when she started speaking, I sensed a flood of emotions. I asked her, “*Does caste discrimination happen in your school?*” She replied, “*No,*” and said that teachers have instructed students not to discuss caste or religion at school.

I asked again, “*So it doesn’t happen at all in your school?*” At first, she repeated that it did not happen. But when I asked more questions, she slowly opened. “*How can discrimination not exist for Dalits like us?*” she questioned back. “*Whether it is school or home, friends or others—anyone who knows our caste discriminates against us.*” She then shared several incidents:

*Once I was thirsty at school and went to the hand pump to drink water. A teacher who taught lower grades was filling her own bottle. I asked her for water from her bottle, but she refused and said, ‘I don’t give my bottle to anyone. Drink water with your hands.’ I felt deeply humiliated but remained silent. I had seen the same teacher give water to other students before, but she did not give it to me. It was extremely painful.*

The student also shared another experience:

*At our school, the mid-day meal is prepared by a husband-and-wife team. One day, when I went to the storeroom to bring a jug, the storekeeper refused to let me in. She did not give me a glass or even a jug.*

Due to the lack of a formal complaint system, the indifference of teachers and administrators, and the fear of damaging relationships, Dalit students seem to choose silence as a safer option. In this sense, silence is not weakness but a practical strategy to protect oneself in an unequal environment. As they don't feel safe and fear punishment due to the environment of school, they keep quiet, as explained by Ambedkar, caste discrimination usually does not happen openly but through everyday behavior and words that humiliate Dalits and force them to accept it. (Ambedkar, 1936).

ND described leaving her friend’s house quietly after realizing that the family did not want a Dalit inside.

*Once, I visited a friend's house. Her surname is Pandit (a skill-based caste). When I arrived, she did not take me inside the room. When I entered, her mother called her and asked who had come. My friend said it was a friend. Then her mother came and asked my name. I told her my first name, and then she asked for my surname. When she learned my surname, her expression changed, and she looked angrily at her daughter. I understood that she did not like a Dalit entering the house. I quietly left.*

Bijay stated that in the community, “keeping quiet is good,” because change takes time. *“It depends on the context and where I am. If it happens at school, I will raise my voice. But in the community, it's better to keep quiet. It takes time to change the community.”* The student's quick understanding of exclusion and decision to leave quietly show how caste restrictions are socially embedded and internalized without ever being expressed in overt language. Bijay's remark, “keeping quiet is good,” is a situation-specific tactic rather than passive acceptance, and it shows their resistance.

Summing this up, silence was used first to avoid confrontation when the power disparity was too strong; second, to manage emotional distress; and third, to maintain relationships.

### **Internalization and Self-Blame**

#### **Feeling “I am Less Capable”**

Among some students, a sense of inferiority or lower capability was also observed. Due to continuous discrimination and unequal treatment, Dalit students seem to understand discrimination as something caused by their own personal weaknesses.

Ajay, a student, said that discrimination is sometimes connected to his own thinking, and he does not consider himself a good student. I asked him whether discrimination affects his studies. He said, *“Yes!” Sometimes, he feels that he is not a good student.*

Bijay shared a similar experience. He said that discrimination does affect students because no one wants to feel discriminated against. *“I felt helpless and guilty.”*

ND ignores discrimination. When asked about it, she said, *“What could I do?” “I belong to a lower caste—what power do I have?”* This shows acceptance of discrimination and a sense of helplessness in situations that can be learned through the concept of internalized oppression. When individuals repeatedly experience

discrimination and labeling, they begin to accept these experiences as true of themselves (Freire, 1970). Dalit Student 1's statement that he does not consider himself a good student is an example of internalized oppression, as unequal treatment is being repeated times and again.

### Normalizing Discrimination

Normalization is also a coping strategy. Some Dalit students normalize caste discrimination by calling it a "*small issue*" or a trivial thing that happens among friends. This helps them avoid conflict and emotional stress.

ND initially did not recognize caste-based slurs as discrimination. When asked about such language, she explained:

*We usually call each other by caste names. For example, I am 'Tatma,' so people call me 'Ge Tatminiyan.' We also call others 'Ge Baviniyan.' Some of our friends are from the Muslim community—we tease them by calling them 'Ge Miyaniyan.*

For her, this was "normal" interaction among friends. She added, "*No matter what caste we belong to, we eat together, sit together, and share space.*" Here, physical proximity and shared space are taken as proof that discrimination does not exist. The presence of friendship becomes evidence of equality. However, the repeated use of caste names as nicknames shows how caste identity continues to structure interaction, even in playful contexts.

When asked why she does not complain, ND responded, "*Why should we complain about small issues among friends? We live together, eat together, play together, and study together. Sometimes these things happen. Even if I complain, what will it change?*"

She also shared that she does not want to complain because it would create unnecessary trouble for her and her friends, and nothing will change.

This shows that normalizing discrimination or treating it as something usual is also a way to emotionally survive. Normalization, therefore, serves two functions. At the individual level, it protects students from emotional stress and social isolation, and at the structural level, it allows caste hierarchy to continue without confrontation. By calling discrimination "teasing" or a "small issue," the deeper power relations remain unquestioned. So, in a nutshell, it can be called that normalization is not simply acceptance. It is a survival strategy within unequal conditions.

### Strategic Resistance

There was not only silence, self-blame, or normalization, but also meaningful resistance. Although the voices were often low, they were powerful in their own way. Two students shared instances where they chose to speak.

SD spoke to a teacher when she was not selected for a competition. When I asked her how she copes with discrimination, she replied, *“I usually keep quiet. But once I spoke to a teacher when they did not select me for a competition. They gave me an assurance that they would include me the next time.”*

This may seem like a small act. However, for a student from a marginalized caste background, questioning authority requires courage. Speaking to a teacher directly challenges the silent expectation that Dalit students should accept decisions without protest. Even if the outcome was only a promise, the act itself reflects agency.

Bijay stated that he would raise his voice if discrimination happened in school, but not in the community, *“So far, I haven’t felt discrimination in school. But if it happens in school, I will certainly raise my voice. In the community, it’s better to keep quiet. It takes time to change the community.”*

This statement shows that resistance is context specific. School is seen as a relatively safer institutional space with some accountability. The community, on the other hand, is perceived as more rigid and hierarchical. His resistance is therefore strategic, not absent.

Ajay shared an experience of what can be called delayed resistance. He was invited to a friend’s sister’s wedding. When food was being served, his friend did not allow him to serve guests because of caste-based untouchability. He felt deeply hurt, *“We did not argue about this at that moment, but later. Because of that incident, we stopped talking. Later, he said sorry, and we became friends again,”* he recalled. *“But our relationship was never the same as before.”*

This is another form of resistance, known as delayed resistance. The student resisted, but only later. This helped him avoid immediate confrontation in a socially sensitive setting. However, he could still express his disagreement. He temporarily broke off his friendship with him to convey that the act was unacceptable.

Dalit students have also adopted the strategy of building relationships selectively and carefully, bonding with only those with whom they felt safe and respected. This shows that even within limited space, Dalit students practiced meaningful forms of resistance in their own ways. They choose selective resistance

and use it as needed. Scott (1985) describes such acts as “everyday forms of resistance.” Resistance does not always take the form of open protest. It can be quiet, indirect, and strategic.

So, in a nutshell, four major strategies have been observed by Dalit students while responding to the caste-based discrimination: silence, internalization, normalization, and strategic resistance. Silence is not acceptance, but a strategic and protective mechanism used in situations of significant power imbalance. Internalization and normalization are used to reduce emotional stress and maintain social relationships. Whereas strategic resistance is used in a safer context. Students also practiced meaningful and context-specific resistance, including speaking to teachers, delaying confrontation, and selectively choosing relationships. These findings show that Dalit students exercise agency within structural constraints, navigating between survival and resistance in their everyday school life. It can also be summarized in a way that students practice coping strategies in three ways: emotion-focused coping, problem-focused active coping, and context-dependent coping.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have explained how Dalit students respond to caste-based discrimination. The study shows that Dalit students not only tolerate discrimination but also react to it depending on the context, level of risk, and possibility of change. Their responses are expressed through different strategies. Four main responses were identified: silence, internalization, normalization, and strategic resistance. Silence is the most common response. However, silence does not mean weakness; rather, it is a form of resistance. Normalizing discrimination is another response to reduce stress and maintain social relationships. At times, Dalit students also confront discrimination directly, which is a strategic resistance. In this way, Dalit students fight caste-based discrimination in their everyday lives and actively exercise their agency.

## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

The results presented in earlier Chapters demonstrate that in the school environment of Janakpur Sub-metropolitan City, caste-based discrimination has not been eradicated but has been transformed into a more subtle, socially acceptable form, and, as such, more difficult to challenge. This chapter explains the context of these findings and how they can be interpreted within the broader body of research on caste, education, and social exclusion in Nepal, and contextualizes the research within the lives of students, educators, and institutional participants. There are three key strands of data: the evolution of overt untouchability into unspoken and symbolic forms of exclusion; perceptual asymmetry between dominant and oppressed communities; and the structural momentum that perpetuates inequality despite proclaimed equity principles. Relevant theories such as Social Reproduction Theory, Social Exclusion Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Intersectionality have been used to contextualize and develop the discussion. The theories are not used as rigid frameworks but as interpretive tools to make sense of patterns emerging from the data. In light of these theories, I have discussed teachers' unconscious biases, peer interactions, administrative practices, and the limited but meaningful responses of Dalit students. This chapter has also tried to present Dalit students not as victims of discrimination, but as social actors with agency who engage in subtle forms of resistance against discrimination. Each section of this chapter is based on thematic threads identified in the literature review and tries to extend them through empirical evidence.

#### **Beyond Legal Reform: The Persistence of Caste-Based Discrimination**

As I have said, legal reform alone is not sufficient to address social inequality. Laws may declare overt forms of discrimination as crimes and may address them to some extent, but caste-based discrimination emerges from cultural norms, social beliefs, and everyday practices, which cannot be addressed by law alone. This shows that legal reform itself has limitations.

During the study, it was observed that incidents of direct caste-based discrimination were relatively few, while indirect forms were more common. In other words, discrimination has changed its form. Apparently, it is not overt and publicly visible but rather subtle and socially accepted. This conclusion closely aligns with the

findings of Bhattachan et al. (2009). Today, open practices of untouchability are rarely seen. Instead, discrimination continues through different expectations, selective or tokenistic inclusion, and symbolic distancing. The major problem here is that such practices are difficult to identify. Even when they are identified, it becomes difficult to define them clearly as discrimination and to file complaints. Because of these challenges, subtle forms of discrimination have become more persistent.

These findings suggest that schools reproduce existing social hierarchies rather than challenge them meaningfully. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), educational institutions tend to reproduce existing social structures. They do this mainly in two ways. First, they normalize dominant values and beliefs. Second, they marginalize alternative identities and values. In this study as well, the school appears to maintain unequal power structures by normalizing dominant cultural values while marginalizing those of oppressed communities. This process is reflected in classroom interactions and institutional arrangements. Although the school does not appear to actively practice discrimination, it also does not challenge it. This failure or the lack of challenge itself becomes a form of reproduction of caste-based discrimination.

### **Equality as Ideology and the Masking of Inequality**

“Everyone is equal in this school” was probably the sentence I heard most often during the study. Almost everyone seemed to hold this kind of belief. In one sense, it reflects a strong ideological commitment to equality expressed by the school administration and teachers. However, these statements read more like moral declarations than reflections of reality. The reason is that there is a large gap between these moral ideas and everyday practices. This ideological commitment does not address inequality. Instead, it hides it.

Bennett (2005) also observed a similar tendency. According to him, Nepali schools often do not challenge power relations. Instead, they adopt the language of inclusion while allowing inequality to continue. If everyone is already considered equal, discrimination becomes automatically irrelevant.

Here, the idea of “illusory inclusion” discussed by Sen (2000) becomes very important. Illusory inclusion treats numerical or physical presence as sufficient. As long as Dalit students are present in school, it is assumed that inclusion has been achieved. So, the authority does not give attention to their participation, recognition, and influence. Equality is not understood in terms of dignity or justice but is limited in

reach and representation. Such ideological commitments make institutions appear progressive, but they actually maintain structural inequality.

### **Subtle Discrimination, Microaggressions, and Normalization**

Most of the caste-based discrimination experienced by Dalit students is subtle, routine, and normalized in nature. For example, caste-based remarks or slurs such as Dominiya or Mushaharni are often taken as jokes and are considered harmless. However, these are not just jokes or harmless behaviors. They carry serious emotional and symbolic meanings. This act is a form of microaggression, a subtle form of discrimination.

Sunar (2019) has provided a clear explanation of this. Sunar understands such acts as insulting practices that send negative messages toward marginalized communities. These incidents may seem small and even go unnoticed, but their impact is deep. For Dalit students, the effects can lead to feelings of insecurity and even withdrawal from participation.

Now the question arises: how do microaggressions continue? Their continuation happens through normalization. When discriminatory behavior is treated as normal, no action is taken against it, there is no criticism, and it continues. Teachers do not intervene in such matters. The administration treats these behaviors as normal peer interactions, further institutionalizing such practices.

### **Teachers' Unconscious Bias and Pedagogical Power**

Teachers play an important role not only in students' academic development but also in their overall growth. This applies to the school where I conducted my study as well. In this study, most of the participating teachers described themselves as neutral and fair. However, as discussions continued, it became clear that they held unconscious biases regarding Dalit and Muslim students' interest in learning and their abilities. The belief that these students "do not want to study" or "do not pay attention" was common among teachers. Although it is problematic, it continues to influence classroom activities and teachers' expectations.

These findings are also reflected in Bishwakarma's (2018) study. He argues that teachers' low expectations play a major role in the academic marginalization of Dalit students. Because of such biased assumptions, teachers often fail to provide the necessary academic support to Dalit students. They frequently neglect Dalit students' learning needs.

Here, it is necessary to mention one particular incident again. During a classroom discussion, a teacher defended the superiority of the Brahmin caste. This shows that teaching itself can become a tool, a medium of maintaining social hierarchy. To understand this situation, Freire's (1970) concept of oppressive pedagogy is useful. He argues that when education reproduces dominant narratives and silences critical voices, it becomes a mechanism of domination.

Another problem that is worth discussing is the denial of bias. Almost all teachers claimed to be completely neutral. This closes the possibilities for self-reflection among teachers. From the perspective of social reproduction, such denial works as a mechanism that allows inequality to continue under the cover of professional neutrality.

### **Institutional Silence as a Mode of Governance**

Does the absence of complaints indicate the absence of discrimination? Certainly not. However, the school administration repeatedly emphasized that no complaints of caste-based discrimination had been received at the school and that this issue had therefore never been discussed. They repeatedly highlighted the lack of any formal complaints and interpreted this absence as proof that discrimination did not exist.

However, the evidence shows that subtle forms of caste-based discrimination do exist. Because such discrimination is not openly visible, it is difficult to file complaints about it. Therefore, silence itself appears as a coping strategy. Here, silence is not a sign of harmony, but rather a result of fear, insecurity, and lack of trust. Students have said, "What happens if we complain?" This suggests that they are aware of possible negative consequences.

Social Exclusion Theory also interprets silence as a form of exclusion. When institutions rely only on formal complaints to identify discrimination, those who cannot speak safely become invisible. In the school, there is no proper complaint mechanism. There is no designated officer to hear grievances. There is zero representation of Dalits in the School Management Committee. In such a situation, the likelihood of complaints is already low, and students' fear of negative outcomes further reinforces silence.

In this way, institutional silence perpetuates discrimination. Such silence protects the institution's moral image, but it further marginalizes the voices of the weak and excluded.

### **Discipline, Opportunity, and Unequal Access to Cultural Capital**

Although teachers claimed that they treated all students equally, this claim appears incomplete. In reality, the experiences of Dalit students reveal unequal access to opportunities, suggesting that equal treatment does not exist, or at least that Dalit students do not experience it as equal. According to students, selection for competitions, leadership roles, and extracurricular activities often favors upper-caste students, especially boys. Dalit students reported being frequently overlooked. When they complain, they only receive promises of the future and not a real-time way out.

This phenomenon can be discussed through Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. He describes that schools tend to promote behaviors, confidence, and characters associated with dominant groups while subduing other marginalized groups. The same pattern can be seen in this school as well. Dalit students have limited access to opportunities that help build cultural capital. In this way, schools reproduce inequality under the appearance of equality.

Chalaune (2020) also identified similar patterns in schools, where the exclusion of Dalit students from extracurricular activities weakened their confidence. In this study as well, it is evident that although there is no open punishment and disciplinary practices are claimed to be applied equally, unequal distribution of opportunities strengthens feelings of inferiority and marginalization among Dalit students.

### **Dalit Students' Responses: Coping, Silence, and Everyday Resistance**

When I began this study, one implicit objective was to restore the agency of Dalit students. During the research, I observed that Dalit students respond to discrimination in complex but strategic ways. These strategies include but are not limited to silence, withdrawal, normalization of incidents, and selective participation.

Here, one thing should be noted: such strategic responses are not passive moves but active, meaningful strategies. Bishwakarma (2017) has also discussed that Dalit students often normalize discrimination in a bid to protect their social relationships and maintain emotional balance. In this regard, his study closely aligns with my findings.

A notable thing is that Dalit students have strengthened their agency. Although small, it is a meaningful form of resistance. These forms of resistance include being careful when choosing friends, speaking selectively, and maintaining educational aspirations.

Freire (1970) also argues that resistance often appears through everyday practices. Open discrimination or overt forms of discrimination are visible, but subtle discrimination needs to be understood. The strategies adopted by Dalit students in their daily lives can be understood as forms of resistance.

Dalit students view education as a path to dignity, which highlights their resilience. However, the agency also has its limits. Until institutional support exists, individual resistance alone cannot break structural inequality. Both individual resistance and institutional support are necessary to create meaningful agency.

### **Intersectionality of Caste, Religion, Gender, and Poverty**

The effects or impacts of caste-based discrimination have an unequal impact on different groups. Dalit girls face double exclusion due to gender norms. In addition, poverty, early marriage, and household responsibilities further limit their educational participation. This study shows that caste-based discrimination is also interconnected with other forms of marginalization. Religious tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities were found to influence interactions within the school.

The theory of intersectionality, proposed by Crenshaw (1991), explains simply how different identities intersect and shape people's experiences of oppression. Teachers often explained Dalit students' low academic performance by linking it to socioeconomic factors. This reflects an intersection of caste-based discrimination with economic and social discrimination.

Another form of intersecting discrimination is also evident here, which is discrimination based on religion. During the study, I observed that religious tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities affected interactions within the school. This intersection of caste and religion has not been highlighted in studies conducted in Nepal's hill regions or other areas of the Tarai. In this sense, the religious dimension that emerged in this study offers a distinct perspective and adds a unique contribution to Nepal-focused educational research.

### **Policy Intentions and Structural Gaps**

Inclusive education, equality, and social justice are the three main pillars of Nepal's education policy. In other words, Nepal's education policies place strong emphasis on these three areas. The Constitution and other related policies have also placed social justice at the center. However, the study shows a large gap between the intentions of these policies and everyday practices within schools. Inclusion is

understood in a very superficial way, limited mainly to student enrollment and access. Schools appear to lack a deeper understanding of the idea of living equality.

Bennett (2005) and Bhattachan et al. (2009) argue that to bring policy reform, institutional culture must be addressed. Changing institutional culture requires training, monitoring, and accountability. However, due to the lack of these elements, the impact of inclusive policies remains limited.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

When I reflect on the theories I have contributed to through this study, I feel I have mainly advanced Social Reproduction Theory and Social Exclusion Theory by offering empirical insights from community schools in the Madhesh region. Although I initially planned to explain the findings through the lens of intersectionality, the evidence generated suggests this study contributes more clearly to Social Reproduction Theory and Social Exclusion Theory.

My study highlights that not only overt discrimination but also institutional inaction are the mechanisms of social reproduction. The absence of formal complaint mechanisms, lack of Dalit representation in the School Management Committee, normalization of caste-based teasing, and denial of bias by teachers function as mechanisms that quietly reproduce existing power relations. Similarly, by showing how silence keeps marginalized groups away from justice, the study further strengthens Social Exclusion Theory. The study demonstrates how silence operates as a structural barrier, keeping marginalized students excluded from recognition, protection, and meaningful participation.

Although not very extensively, this study analyzes the intersection of caste and religion in school education within the Madhesh context. This suggests that caste-based exclusion cannot be fully understood in isolation, as there are many other intersections functioning to maintain caste hierarchy. Thus, the study also contributes to the field of intersectionality. Most existing studies have been focused on hill regions, where the religious dimension was largely absent. In the Madhesh context, the religious angle has also emerged, which is a new contribution.

### **Empirical Contribution**

Empirically, this study contributes new evidence from the Madhesh Province, a region that has remained underrepresented in qualitative research on caste-based discrimination in Nepal. In contrast to most studies that have addressed the policy-

practice gap, enrollment, and dropout among Dalit students, this research provides an ethnographic account of how caste operates in daily school life.

The study documents how discrimination manifests in everyday school life through both overt and subtle means, with a particular emphasis on the latter. It discusses practices such as selective opportunity distribution, peer group formation, avoidance, and institutional silence as subtle ways of discrimination.

One of the major highlights of the study is the placing of silence as an institutional strategy. Institutions use silence as a strategy to protect existing hierarchies. On the other hand, it discusses Dalit students' coping strategies, foregrounding their agency within structural constraints.

Although not focused on the way, this study also questions the gap between policy and practice in government schools in Madhesh and offers an everyday reality. It offers important evidence arguing that meaningful inclusion requires more action than just ideological commitment.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have argued that caste-based discrimination in schools is a part of everyday practice, not an exception. Although progressive laws and policies exist, schools continue to reproduce caste hierarchies because they do not directly confront caste-based discrimination.

Dalit students have developed a strategic resilience within these structures. They continue their journeys with different coping strategies and hope for the future. Their responses reveal that agency persists even within constrained conditions.

My argument is that if education is to open the door to social justice, it must move beyond symbolic equality and actively dismantle the mechanisms that reproduce inequality.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### **Conclusion of the Study**

When I started this study, I had three main objectives. The first was to understand how caste discrimination happens in schools. The second was to examine the role of school administration and teachers in perpetuating caste discrimination. The third was to understand how students respond to such discrimination.

While answering the first research question, what was found was that caste-based discrimination is mostly subtle and embedded in everyday school practices. It can be observed in the classroom interactions, and informal behaviors rather than direct or explicit ones. These everyday practices make discrimination appear normal and less visible. Students use casteist jokes and slurs. They form groups along caste or comfort lines. The study also found that teachers, peers, and school management committee play a significant role in shaping caste relations. Discrimination is reproduced mainly through silence, normalization and denial. Institutions use silence as a strategy to avoid caste-based discrimination issue. Institutional practices and attitudes contribute to the continuation and normalization of caste-based inequalities within the school. Schools often say that everyone is equal and that there is no discrimination. However, students' experiences—especially those of Dalit students—are different. Dalit students sometimes felt that they were treated differently. They were addressed using disrespectful words. Teachers did not have high expectations in the classroom. All these are forms of discrimination.

Dalit students respond to discrimination in various ways, including silence, withdrawal, internalization and strategic resistance. In many cases, they internalize discriminatory practices as part of normal school life. Even when Dalit students felt discrimination, they mostly remained silent, kept some distance, accepted it as normal, or resisted only selectively. This is not their weakness, but a strategy to protect themselves in an unequal society. In this study, I did not find the school to be a neutral place or a strong space of resistance. Social inequalities and power relations in society are also evident within the school.

## **Implications of the Study**

### **Implications for Educational Practice**

The most important point is that teachers need to move beyond the shallow understanding that equality means treating everyone in the same way. Caste appears in very small and everyday behaviors. It is reflected in language. How students are addressed in class, how groups are formed, and what language is used, all these need serious self-reflection. Therefore, teacher training should include not only teaching methods but also discussions on society, caste, power, privilege, and social justice.

### **Implications for School Leadership**

School administration needs to understand that discrimination can exist even when no formal complaint is made. It is necessary to establish a complaint system, develop mechanisms to address complaints, create a fear-free environment, and promote open dialogue and self-evaluation. Wrong practices should not be ignored in the name of “maintaining peace.” Saying that everyone is equal should not be used to hide inequality.

### **Policy Implications**

Policies alone cannot solve the problem. Along with policies, culture of schools should also be changed. It is important to examine how policies can bring about real change in schools' daily culture. Equality should not be understood only as access and enrollment, but also as respect for students, their experiences, and practical inclusion.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future research can be extended into three areas. First, how students' experiences change over time. Second, comparative studies across different schools and regions. Third, further research on teachers' beliefs and institutional accountability.

### **Concluding Reflection**

As I am writing the final chapter of this study today, it is almost 12 o'clock at night. In the cold of *Magh*, while taking my hand out from under the blanket and pressing the keys of my laptop, I keep thinking—what have I learned from this study? I feel that one of the main conclusions of my study is that caste-based discrimination in schools is not always clear or visible. It is often subtle and exists in small, everyday actions. It works through silence and continues even when what is considered “normal” behavior is not. What we often accept as “normal” is actually not normal,

because it increases inequality. Interactions between teachers, teachers-students, and students-students help discrimination continue due to power relations, cultural practices, and silence. Even though laws and policies strongly promote equality, I observed that they do not automatically change how people think or act in schools. What affected me most was how Dalit students carefully choose when to speak and when to remain silent not because they are weak, but because they understand power and consequences. Listening to their experiences helped me realize that inclusion cannot be measured only by enrollment or rules written on paper. Real change requires schools to listen, reflect, and take responsibility for everyday practices. Without questioning silence and what is deemed normal, schools may continue to appear inclusive while inequality quietly persists.

Before starting the research, my understanding about caste was limited as I was understanding caste as a social structure. I was only little aware of how it affects people in everyday life, especially in schools. I am from the most dominant caste-Brahmin-background with structural privilege. I was not aware how subtle forms of discrimination are experienced by Dalit students in their daily interactions.

However, during the fieldwork, my understanding gradually changed. My time in school as a researcher taught me that discrimination is not always direct. It often happens through silence, normalization and denial. Now, I have started seeing caste from people's perspective, particularly from Dalit's and see it as something that people experience in real life, not just as a concept. Caste is not a concept, but an experience. This study has changed my perspective and made me more sensitive to issues of equality and inclusion in education.

### **Contribution of the Study**

What has this study contributed overall? After reaching the end of this study, this is the second question that came to my mind. When I thought deeply about this question, I realized that, through this study, I had presented caste-based discrimination in schools in Madhesh in a deeper, more human way. Most earlier studies focused on educational outcomes or connected discrimination mainly to policy or legal issues. In this study, I have explained discrimination as it happens in everyday school life. I have shown how caste discrimination continues through small actions, silence, and activities that are considered “normal.” This helps in understanding the real situation inside schools.

Another important contribution to this study is the explanation of silence and normalization. Not talking about discrimination is also a form of discrimination. The absence of discussion does not mean discrimination does not exist. Students often do not speak because they are afraid, and in this way, discrimination continues. In this study, I have clearly explained this phenomenon.

The third contribution of this study is bringing forward the voices of Dalit students studying in community schools in Madhesh. They are affected by discrimination, but they are not just passive recipients of it. They also show active resistance. I have shown that they think carefully about discrimination and choose when to speak and when to remain silent. They are capable social actors who use strategies. This helps us see Dalit students not only as weak, but as aware and struggling individuals.

Finally, this study shows that laws and policies alone are not enough to remove caste-based discrimination inside schools. To make schools inclusive, changes are needed in teachers' thinking, school behavior, and institutional responsibility. Attention to everyday school practices is necessary. The study also points out that real change is possible only when schools take responsibility.

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## APPENDIXES

### **Methodology for Thematic Coding of Interview Data**

Thematic coding of the interview transcripts was conducted manually using a qualitative inductive approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. This process was iterative, reflexive, and grounded in the data, ensuring that themes emerged directly from participants' accounts rather than imposing preconceived categories.

The analysis was performed without reliance on software tools instead utilizing a simple, transparent manual procedure involving printed transcripts, highlighters, margin notes, and tabular summaries. This low-technology method enhances replicability and is suitable for ethnographic studies with a modest dataset (eight interview transcripts). Below is the exact step-by-step mechanism employed, presented in a format suitable for direct inclusion in the methodology or appendix section of the dissertation.

#### **Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data**

- All interview transcripts were printed in full.
- Each transcript was read multiple times while taking initial reflective notes in the margins.
- Notes focused on recurring phrases, emotional tones, contradictions, and patterns related to caste discrimination (e.g., marking instances of "discrimination," "equality," "bias," or caste-specific terms like "Dalit," "Brahmin,").
- A separate reading journal was maintained to document initial impressions, such as the contrast between administrative optimism and student experiences of subtle exclusion.

#### **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

- Transcripts were re-read line-by-line.
- Meaningful units (sentences or paragraphs) were highlighted using color-coded highlighters:
  - Yellow: Direct references to discrimination or equality.
  - Green: Descriptions of diversity or student interactions.
  - Blue: Teacher behaviors, biases, or pedagogical practices.

- Pink: Institutional measures, grievances, or disciplinary actions.
- Orange: Academic performance and socioeconomic factors.
- Beside each highlighted segment, concise codes were handwritten in the margin (e.g., "peer slurs," "self-segregation," "informal warnings," "parental unawareness," "felt bullied").
- Codes were kept close to the data (descriptive level) rather than interpretive at this stage.
- A master code list was compiled on a separate sheet, grouping similar codes (e.g., all instances of "teasing," "banter," and "slurs" under an initial code cluster labeled "verbal caste references").

### **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

- All coded segments were cut from photocopies of transcripts (or listed verbatim) and organized into a large tabular matrix on A3 sheets.
- Columns represented participant groups (SMC Chair, Teachers, Dalit Students, Non-Dalit Students); rows represented emerging code clusters.
- Segments were physically pasted or transcribed into the matrix cells.
- Patterns across rows and columns were identified by visually scanning for recurrence, similarity, and difference.
- Initial theme candidates were drafted on index cards (e.g., "Subtle vs. Overt Discrimination," "Institutional Gaps," "Socioeconomic Barriers to Performance").
- Themes were refined by asking: Does this capture multiple codes? Does it address the research questions? (e.g., linking codes on teacher assumptions to RQ3 on unconscious biases).

### **Phase 4: Reviewing Themes**

- Draft themes were tested against the full dataset:
  - Each transcript was re-examined to ensure no coded data were omitted.
  - Themes were merged (e.g., "peer grouping" and "self-segregation" into broader student interaction patterns) or split (e.g., separating religious from caste discrimination where intersections were clear).
  - Negative cases were actively sought (e.g., Teacher 2's denial of discrimination) to refine theme boundaries.

- A theme map was drawn on a single sheet, showing six core themes with sub-themes and connecting lines to indicate overlaps (e.g., biases linking to disciplinary practices and performance).

#### **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

- Each theme was defined in writing, specifying:
  - Scope (what it includes/excludes).
  - Central organizing concept (e.g., "Unconscious Biases" defined as implicit stereotypes affecting equitable interaction).
  - Links to research questions.
- Theme names were chosen for clarity and analytical insight (e.g., "Observed and Experienced Forms of Discrimination" rather than generic "Discrimination Incidents").
- Sub-themes were identified where data showed distinct dimensions (e.g., overt slurs vs. subtle avoidance).

#### **Phase 6: Producing the Report**

- Compelling extracts (direct quotes) were selected for each (sub)theme, ensuring representation across participant groups.
- Quotes were triangulated (e.g., teacher observations corroborated or contrasted with student experiences).
- Tables were created manually to summarize comparisons (e.g., Tables 4.3–4.6 in Chapter IV).
- Analytical notes were added to highlight implications without over-interpretation (reserved for discussion chapter).

### **Guiding Questions for Interview**

#### A. Dalit Students (Primary Group)

**Objective:** Lived experiences, daily caste interactions, coping strategies

**Introduction:**

“This conversation will remain confidential. Please share only what you feel safe to talk about.”

1. Please share your general experience of how you are treated in school.
2. Have you ever felt separated or treated differently in the classroom or playground? How?
3. How do teachers usually call you or offer help to you?
4. Has anyone ever made caste-related comments or jokes about you?
  - When did it happen?
  - How did you respond?
5. When friends form groups, where do you usually find yourself?
6. How is your experience during meals, drinking water, playing, or group work?
7. How does such behavior affect your studies?
8. How do you usually cope with or deal with these situations?
9. What suggestions do you have to improve the school environment?

#### B. Non-Dalit Students (Comparative Perception)

1. How do students form groups in the classroom? Why?
2. What kind of relationship do you have with Dalit friends?
3. Do teachers treat all students equally or differently?
4. Are caste-related jokes or comments common in school?
5. Do you think such behavior is “normal” or “wrong”? Why?

#### C. Teachers

1. How diverse is the student population in the school in terms of caste and gender?
2. Have you observed examples of discrimination in the classroom?
3. What kind of unconscious bias might teachers have?
4. How are Dalit students treated in disciplinary matters?
5. What does the SMC or school do to prevent discrimination?

6. What do you think are the main reasons for lower performance among Dalit students?

D. SMC / PTA

1. How is caste diversity managed in the school?
2. Is caste discrimination seen as a problem or concern in school?
3. How are complaints from marginalized students heard and addressed?
4. How do school or SMC rules help ensure equality?
5. What would you like to do to prevent discrimination?

### **Consent Form**

A. Adult Consent Form (Teachers, SMC, PTA, Parents)

**Title:** Educational Ethnography on Caste-Based Discrimination in School

**Researcher:** Roshan Kumar Jha

**Institution:** Kathmandu University, School of Education

**Purpose**

This study aims to understand subtle and direct practices of caste-based discrimination in schools. What Participation Involves

- Informal conversations or interviews
- Observation of classroom and school activities
- Non-official meetings

Participation is voluntary. You have the right to stop participating or choose not to answer any question at any time.

Confidentiality

Your name, school, and identity will not be mentioned in any report.

Consent Statement

“I have read all the information above. I agree to participate in this study voluntarily.”

**Name:**

**Signature:**

**Date:**

B. Student Assent Form (Age 10–17)

**Title:** Educational Ethnography on Caste-Based Discrimination in School

**Researcher:** Roshan Kumar Jha

**Institution:** Kathmandu University, School of Education

**Purpose:** This study aims to understand subtle and direct practices of caste-based discrimination in schools. “I will spend a few days with you to understand how you are treated in school on a daily basis. If you want to take part in this study and share your thoughts, ideas, and feelings, you are welcome to participate. If you do not feel like speaking or do not want to talk about a particular topic, you do not have to.

No one will know your name. Only say ‘yes’ if you feel comfortable.”

**Student Name:**

**Agree (Yes/No):**

**Signature:**

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

**Bias** - A tendency to favor or disfavor a particular group based on assumptions, stereotypes, or personal beliefs rather than objective judgment.

**Brahmanical** - A term referring to social or cultural practices influenced by Brahmanical ideology and the caste hierarchy.

**Normalization** - A process through which discriminatory behavior becomes accepted as a normal part of everyday life.

**Caste-based Discrimination** – The form of discrimination based on Caste identities. The Hindu society has a caste-based hierarchy where the so-called upper caste generally discriminates the so-called lower caste. This includes unequal treatment, exclusion, or denial of opportunities to individuals or groups. It may be direct actions, institutional practices, or structural inequalities (Pincus, 1996).

**Dalit** - A term used by marginalized communities to collectively refer to historically oppressed communities that have been socially, economically, and politically excluded. Due to the caste system in South Asia, a large section of society was excluded who later started using the term as a political and social identity. This includes both "untouchables" and "touchable" but historically marginalized (Guru, 2009; Omvedt, 2017).

**Hidden Curriculum** - Unwritten social rules, values, and expectations that students learn in school through everyday practices rather than formal teaching.

**Institutional Discrimination** - The discrimination that is caused by the rules, policies, and decision-making processes of institutions such as schools. Institution's rules and practices may unintentionally favor dominant groups and disfavor marginalized groups (Pincus, 1996; Bhattachan et al., 2009).

**Intersectionality** - A theoretical framework that explains how different social identities (such as caste, gender, class, religion, and ethnicity) interact to shape individuals' experiences of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991).

**Microaggression** - Subtle and everyday expressions of prejudice that communicate discriminatory messages toward marginalized groups. They may be seen as jokes, comments, or exclusionary behaviors (Sue, 2010).

**School Management Committee (SMC)** - A governing body of a school responsible for overseeing school administration and coordination between the school and the community (MoEST, 2019).

**Structural Discrimination** - Inequalities that emerge from broader social, economic, and cultural systems. These inequalities affect access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility for marginalized groups (Sunar, 2019).