STRRUGLES OF *GANDHARVA* IN PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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erAN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Yogendra Gandhari* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in Development Studies* presented on 3 February 2026 entitled *Struggles of Gandharva Pursuing Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry*.

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This research presents narratives of four *Gandharva* and my own journey of higher education. My inquiry was shaped to explore the experience of *Gandharva* in pursuing higher education, with social exclusion at the centre. The narratives of my research include how social exclusionary practices and supporting contexts shape their journey to higher education. This research, through the experiences of my research participants, unearths how Nepal's education system has embedded the power structure and sustained caste-based exclusion, impacting the lower representation of *Dalit*, including *Gandharva*, in higher education.

I choose my research participants based on their status as higher education students in Nepal. In doing so, this narrative inquiry uses Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital to explain *Gandharva*'s journey to higher education. This research adopts a critical lens to unearth the power dynamics between *Dalit* and non-*Dalit* and their implications for reducing the representation of *Gandharva* in higher education. This research sought to explore two research questions: How do *Gandharva* experience social exclusion in the pursuit of higher education? How do power relations between *Dalit* and non-*Dalit* contribute to the exclusion of *Gandharva* in the pursuit of higher education?

The narrative inquiry with four *Gandharva* and my experience as a community member laid the foundation for meaning making. The experiences have exemplified various themes for explaining their journey to higher education. Their experiences demonstrate that Nepal's education system has been fuelling caste-based discrimination, both in direct and subtle ways, which has a powerful impact on the

lower representation of *Gandharva* in higher education. Likewise, it appears that *Gandharva*'s livelihood priorities over education, community humiliations towards their educational achievement, caste-based discrimination within academic institutions, and a visible gap between their culture and higher education curriculum have been adversely impacting their access to and completion of higher education. In addition, it shows that *Gandharva*'s preference for immediate earnings has outweighed long-term investment in education, and their peer pressure to engage early has led them to take up income-generating activities, creating a barrier to pursuing higher education.

The findings show that *Gandharva* who have taken the journey of higher education hold a strong resilience towards the embedded caste-based discrimination and exclusion across Nepali society. Likewise, they aspire to do something good for the betterment of their society, which enables them to pursue higher education. In conclusion, Nepal's education system can advance education justice through identifying caste-based disparity in education policies and their implementation, reaching the doorsteps of backward communities like *Gandharva*, facilitating the internalization of the importance of higher education for their social and economic transformation, indigenizing education through the integration of *Gandharva*'s arts, culture, and traditional knowledge, and securing the inclusion of *Gandharva*-like communities in today's neoliberal capitalism-led higher education system.

…… 3 February 2026

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सारांश

यो अनुसन्धानले म लगायत अन्य चार चना गन्धर्व समुदायका व्यक्तिहरूको विद्यालयदेखि उच्च शिक्षासम्मको अनुभवहरू कथात्मकरूपमा प्रस्तुत गर्दछ । यो अनुसन्धानले गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षाको अनुभवहरू अन्वेषण गरेको छ, जसको केन्द्रमा सामाजिक बहिष्करण (Social Exclusion) रहेको छ । यो अनुसन्धानको कथाहरूले सामाजिक बहिष्करणका अभ्यासहरू र सहयोगी सन्दर्भहरूले गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षाको यात्रा कसरी तय गर्दछ भन्ने विषय समेटेको छ । मेरा सहभागीहरूको अनुभवको माध्यमबाट यो अनुसन्धानले उच्च शिक्षामा गन्धर्व लगायतका अन्य दलित समुदायको न्यून प्रतिनिधित्वको लागि नेपालको शिक्षा प्रणालीले शक्ति संरचना (Power Structure) र जातीय बहिष्करणको निरन्तरतालाई संस्थागत गरेको कुरा उजागर गर्दछ ।

नेपालको उच्च शिक्षाको विद्यार्थीहरूलाई मैले आफ्नो अनुसन्धाको सहभागीहरुकोरूपमा छनौट गरेको छु । यसै सन्दर्भमा, गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षाको यात्रा व्याख्या गर्न यो कथात्मक अनुसन्धानले Pierre Bourdeu को सामाजिक र सांस्कृतिक पूँजिको सिद्धान्त (Theory of Social and Cultural Capital) प्रयोग गरेको छ । दलित र गैर दलितबीचको शक्ति असन्तुलनलाई पहिचान गर्न र त्यसले गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षामा प्रतिनिधित्व न्यनीकरणको लागि कसरी योगदान पुर्याउँदछ भन्ने विषयलाई उजागर गर्न यो अनुसन्धानले आलोचनात्मक दृष्टिकोण (Critical Lens) आत्मसात् गरेको छ । यो अनुसन्धानले दुईवटा अनुसन्धान प्रश्नहरूमा आधारित रही गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षाको अनुभवहरूको बारेमा खोज गरेकोर छ । ती प्रश्नहरू हुन् - (१) उच्च शिक्षा हासिल गर्ने क्रममा गन्धर्वहरूले सामाजिक बहिष्करण कसरी अनुभव गर्छन्? (२) दलित र गैर-दलितबीचका शक्ति सम्बन्धहरूले उच्च शिक्षा हासिल गर्ने क्रममा गन्धर्वको बहिष्करणमा कसरी योगदान पुऱ्याउँछन्?

यो अनुसन्धानमा अर्थ निर्माण (Meaning Making) को लागि मैले चार जना गन्धर्व समुदायका व्यक्तिहरूसँगको गरिएको कथात्मक अनुसन्धान र मेरो आफ्नै अनुभवलाई आधार बनाएको छु । यी अनुभवहरूले गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षाको यात्रा व्याख्या गर्नको लागि विभिन्न विषयगत क्षेत्रहरू प्रस्तुत गरेका छन् । ती अनुभवहरूले नेपालको शिक्षा प्रणालीले प्रत्यक्ष तथा अप्रत्यक्ष दुवै रूपमा जातीय विभेदलाई प्रोत्साहित गरेको छ, जसले गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षामा न्यून प्रतिनिधित्वको लागि गहिरो प्रभाव पारेको छ । त्यसैगरी, गन्धर्व समुदायको जीविकोपार्जनको आवश्यकताले शिक्षालाई ओझेलमा पार्नु, उनीहरूको शैक्षिक उपलब्धीलाई अन्य समुदायले हेयको दृष्टिले हेर्न प्रचलन, शैक्षिक संस्थाभित्र हुने जातीय विभेद, र उनीहरूको संस्कृति र उच्च शिक्षाको पाठ्यक्रमबीच भएको स्पष्ट अन्तरले गन्धर्व समुदायको उच्च शिक्षामा पहुँच र पूर्णतामा नकारात्मक प्रभाव पारेको छ । साथै, गन्धर्व समुदायको तत्काल आम्दानीप्रतिको रूचिले शिक्षामा दीर्घकालीन लगानीलाई हतोत्साही बनाउँछ र सहकर्मीहरूले चाँडैनै आम्दानी गरेको देखेर उनीहरूमा पनि छिट्टै आयआर्जन कार्यमा सहभागी हुन दबाव पर्दछ, जसले उनीहरूको उच्च शिक्षा हाँसिलमा बाधा सृजना गरेको छ ।

अनुसन्धानका परिणामहरूले उच्च शिक्षा हाँसिल गरेका गन्धर्वहरूले नेपाली समाजमा व्याप्त जातीय भेदभाव र सामाजिक बहिष्करणप्रति बलियो सहनशीलता (Resilience) राख्ने देखाउँछन् । साथै, उनीहरू आफ्नो समुदायको उन्नतिका लागि केही सकारात्मक योगदान गर्ने आकाङ्क्षा राख्छन्, जसले उनीहरूलाई उच्च शिक्षा हाँसिल गर्न उत्प्रेरित गर्दछ ।। निष्कर्षमा, नेपालको शिक्षा प्रणालीले शिक्षा समावेशी नीति र कार्यान्वयनमा भएका जातीय असमानता पहिचान गर्ने, गन्धर्व जस्ता पछाडि पारिएका समुदायसम्म प्रत्यक्ष पहुँच विस्तार गरी उनीहरूको सामाजिक तथा आर्थिक रूपान्तरणको लागि उच्च शिक्षाको महत्वको आत्मीकरणबारे सहजीकरण

गर्ने, गन्धर्व समुदायको कला, संस्कृति र परम्परागत ज्ञान समावेश गरी शिक्षालाई स्थानीयकरण (Indigenize) गर्ने, र वर्तमान नवउदारवादी पुँजीवाद (Neoliberal Capitalism) बाट प्रेरित उच्च शिक्षा प्रणालीमा गन्धर्वजस्ता सीमान्तकृत समुदायको समावेशीता सुनिश्चित गर्ने जस्ता कार्य गरी शैक्षिक न्यायलाई प्रवर्द्धन गर्न सक्छ ।

..... ३ फेब्रुअरी २०२६

योगेन्द्र गान्धारी

डिग्री उम्मेदवार

This dissertation entitled *Struggles of Gandharva Pursuing Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry* presented By *Yogendra Gandhari* on *3 February 2026.*

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

…… 3 February 2026

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted earlier for the candidature for any other degree.

…….. 3 February 2026

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DEDICATION

This work is profoundly dedicated...

To the *Gandharva* and their communities with a hope of increased understanding and awareness of the importance of higher education, and increased participation and completion of *Gandharva* in higher education.

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My research participants have profoundly shaped this dissertation and breathed life into my research through their lifelong experiences. Hence, I would like to show a deep respect and appreciation for all my research participants. Likewise, I extend my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the *Gandharva* community of Bhansar, Tanahun district, for their warm welcome and incomparable hospitality.

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Yogendra Gandhari
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

AN ABSTRACT 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS i

ABBREVIATIONS v

CHAPTER I 1

INTRODUCTION 1

My Journey to Higher Education 4

Early Education and Schooling Experience 4

Transition to a New School and Continued Education 5

Challenges in Higher Education 6

Statement of the Problem 7

Purpose of the Research 9

Research Questions 9

Rationale of the Study 9

Significance of the Study 10

Delimitation of the Study 11

Chapter Summary 11

CHAPTER II 12

LITERATURE REVIEW 12

Historical Origin of the Exclusion of the *Gandharva* 12

Systemic Disparity 15

Higher Education System in Nepal 17

Higher Education Policy of Nepal 18

Existence of Exclusion in Higher Education of Nepal 19

Understanding Bourdieu's Social and Cultural Capital Theory 21

Research Gap 26

Chapter Summary 26

CHAPTER III 28

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 28

Philosophical Consideration..... 28

Critical Research Paradigm..... 30

Research Method..... 31

Study Area and Selection of Research Participants..... 32

Meeting my Participants 32

Mr. Leader.....34

Mr. Therapist 35

Mr. Development Expert.....36

Mr. Musician 37

Quality Standards..... 38

Trustworthiness.....38

Reflexivity.....39

Temporality 39

Sociality.....40

Spatiality.....40

Ethical Consideration..... 41

Chapter Summary..... 42

CHAPTER IV..... 43

ENTRY WITH NARRATIVE 43

Entry with Mr. Leader's Story 43

Mr. Leader's Story.....43

Mr. Therapist 46

Mr. Development Expert.....49

Mr. Musician 56

Chapter Summary..... 61

CHAPTER V 62

MAKING MEANING OF NARRATIVES 62

System Fuelling Discrimination based on Caste and Exclusion ... 63

Livelihood Priorities Outweighing Education..... 65

Perception of Parent and Community towards Formal Education 66

Caste Based Ostracism Within Academic Institutions..... 67

Cultural Integration in Education 69

Lack of Education Justice 70

Perception Towards Education: A Tool for Immediate Earning . 71

Peer Pressure and Family Responsibilities: Barrier to Education 72

Power Relation Between *Dalit* and Non-*Dalit* in Pursuing Higher Education..... 74

***Gandharva*'s Resilience and Aspirations**..... 75

Chapter Summary..... 76

CHAPTER VI..... 77

MY REFLECTION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS..... 77

My Research Agenda..... 77

Formulation of My Research Question..... 77

Responding to My Research Question..... 78

Social Exclusion (Inclusion) in Formal Education 78

Power Relation Between *Dalit* and Non-*Dalit* in Pursuing Higher Education 78

System's Gap in Communicating the Importance of Higher Education.....79

Gap Between HE Curriculum and *Gandharva* Culture.....80

Conclusion 80

Implications 82

REFERENCES 83

ABBREVIATIONS

AHRC	Asian Human Rights Commission
BBS	Bachelor of Business Studies
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CEHRD	Centre for Education and Human Resource Development
GoN	Government of Nepal
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MoLJ	Ministry of Law and Justice
MPhil	Master of Philosophy
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NLC	Nepal Law Commission
NSO	National Statistics Office
OECD	The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
VSO	Volunteer Service Organization
UGC	University Grants Commission

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a country of diverse languages and ethnicities, where around 142 castes live and use 124 mother tongues (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2023a). The Nepal social structure has been categorized by religious beliefs, geographic location, and ethnic background. The Nepalese society has clearly marked ethnic groups under the *Dalit* and non-*Dalit* categories. National *Dalit* Commission (October 15, 2025) listed 26 caste groups as part of the *Dalit* community. According to the National *Dalit* Commission, the *Dalit,* as a Hindu hierarchical caste system, was introduced by the National Code of Conduct 1854 (Muluki Ain 1910), which categorized *Dalit* as untouchable castes and labelled them as untouchables, requiring purification if touched by. *Dalit* was presumed to be untouchable in society which perpetuated caste-based discrimination and forced them to remain backward in the state's mainstream economically, politically, educationally, and religiously.

Dalit is a collective form of caste that has faced/continues to face caste-based atrocities and untouchability based on the Hindu hierarchical caste-based system. *Dalit* communities face social exclusion in different avenues ranging from public to private places compromising their civil rights. Likewise, *Dalit* communities face multiple social exclusionary practices in higher education, such as social discrimination and discouragement, discrimination in academic institutions, economic constraint, and so forth.

The constitution of Nepal in its Article 41 ensures the Rights of *Dalit,* which provides their proportional inclusion in the state's bodies and adopts a policy for strengthening *Dalit*' capacity to foster their representation in government services and other employment sectors (Nepal Law Commission [NLC], 2015, pp. 18-19). The Article 14(2) provisions free education for *Dalit* up to higher education with a scholarship (p. 19).

Likewise, Article 31 ensures the Rights to Education, which provides compulsory and free education up to the basic level, free education up to the secondary level education, and free higher education for indigent and people with disabilities (p. 16).

The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education 2018, in its Article 3 of Chapter 2, articulates the Right to get education, providing *Dalit* with free higher education (NLC, 2015, p.4). In addition, the National Education Policy of Nepal 2019 adopts inclusive policies to advance the education of *Dalit* communities. The Policy, in its policy section 10.29, and its implementation strategy provide for full and partial investment in any of the three tiers of government to strengthen education of *Dalit* and other economically indigent group (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology [MoEST], 2019, p. 42). Likewise, the policy adopts a strategy to identify and address issues related to inclusion from early childhood education to higher education (p.43). Furthermore, the policy also strategizes to ensure equal behaviour and equal learning opportunities for all, ensuring abolition of caste-based untouchability in school (p. 43)

Despite constitutional and policy provisions, *Dalit* has minimal access to and a low completion rate of formal education. *Dalit* students face caste-based discrimination and exclusion in academic institutions and in communities too. Caste-based discrimination has been embedded in academic institutions, either in a direct form or in a subtle form. In many cases, administrators and teachers show discriminatory behaviour in academic institutions. In other cases, the curriculum and textbook themselves include discriminatory words based on casteism. Likewise, the sustained caste-based discrimination in society discourages *Dalit* from acquiring formal education. Hence, due to historical marginalization, caste-based discrimination, and social bondage *Dalit* were/are not able to enjoy educational opportunities. In Nepal, the dominance of privileged caste-groups in decision-making positions has obscured the implementation of inclusive policies in organizations, due to owners' disinterest, merit-based enrolment in higher education under neo-liberalism, and capitalism. This has created a barrier to *Dalit* pursuing higher education.

The statistical report on *Dalit* shows lower literacy levels, lower completion rates in formal schooling, and higher education attainment among *Dalit* compared to non-*Dalit* (NSO, 2025). The data shows that *Dalit* children below 18 years of age have 90% literacy rates, which is 4.9% below that of non-*Dalit*. Likewise, the literacy rate of *Dalit* in the 5 years or above age is 8.8% lower than that of non-*Dalit*. Moreover, the completion rate of secondary level education (grades 9-12) in *Dalit* is only 51.3%, which is 6.3% lower than the national average and 7.2% lower than that of non-*Dalit*. Furthermore, the completion rate of higher education (bachelor's and

above) is more unequal, as data show that only 1.6% *Dalit* complete higher education, which is 5.4% lower than the national average and 5.8% lower than that of non-*Dalit*. The statistical report outlines that there are disparities in access to education for *Dalit*, and there are other economic, social and other factors contributing to the unequal distribution of educational opportunities for *Dalit* and non-*Dalit*.

The *Gandharva* has been categorized as one of the 26 *Dalit* castes of Nepal, comprising about 6,971 people (NSO, 2023b) and has spread throughout Nepal's territory, particularly in hilly and mountain districts. Traditionally, *Gandharva* were known for singing, and many still make it their primary occupation. *Gandharva* plays a musical instrument commonly known as *Sarangee* (a wooden instrument with four strings that produces melodious music when a bow is used). *Gandharva* transforms historical and contemporary events into beautifully crafted songs, develops tuning, and disseminates them to others. The recent 2021 national census statistics do not report the literacy rate for the *Gandharva* community; however, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) (2014) reported a literacy rate of 68.7% for the *Gandharva* community. The flash I report of Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) (2018/19) showed that only 4% of children from the *Dalit* community, and about 3% of *Gandharva* children graduate to higher secondary education. Enrolment and graduation data for *Gandharva* in higher education have not been officially recorded, but as a member of the same community, I observed that their pass-out rate is significantly low.

Like other *Dalit*, *Gandharva* are continually victimized by caste-based discrimination, exclusion, and avoidance in different socio-cultural, political, and economic arenas, and the education sector is not an exception. The discrimination ranges from teachers and peer students using derogatory words to untouchability at water taps and public places, to exclusion from school extracurricular activities such as *Saraswati Puja* (worship of the goddess of knowledge and wisdom), and so forth. Likewise, communities perpetuate various forms of discrimination by making satirical comment about *Gandharva's* educational progress or failure, thereby discouraging them from continuing their education.

In higher education, *Gandharva* faced an additional economic burden. They often need to be involved in earning to cover the costs of education. They merely have access to scholarship opportunities, and even if they receive one, the amount is not adequate for completing their educational journey. Due to sustained exclusion and

structural domination, *Gandharva* do not have the courage to claim constitutional rights to education, which is one of the greatest loopholes in Nepal's education system. This has perpetuated a lower representation of *Gandharva* in higher education in Nepal.

My Journey to Higher Education

In this chapter, I narrated my journey from pre-school to school and school to higher education.

Early Education and Schooling Experience

I started my formal education in 1989 by enrolling in a pre-primary class (locally known as "*Sishu Kakchhya*") at Bal Mandir School in Gorkha. My uncle said that my brother-in-law took me to the school and enrolled me in the pre-primary class. From the beginning, I was one of the good-performing students, and schoolteachers always appreciated my performance. I was always among the top two students in the class. As the school did not have upper classes, I studied there up to grade three and shifted to a nearby government school for my further study.

My father worked at the District Health Office and my mother was a house manager. He always motivated us to study for our bright future. During my school years, he shared his own experiences on how he faced of caste-based discrimination in a formal education setting. He shared his experience of schooling as,

> *I had to take my own mat to a school. The upper caste used to refuse sharing their mat, believing that my touch would pollute them. Even schoolteachers avoided touching me as they believed that my touch would pollute them too.*

He further shared that,

> *In that time, Dalit people were required to leave pathways if higher-caste individuals passed by, and Dalit people were not authorized to build two-story houses. Additionally, Dalit like us were excluded from religious feasts, such as Swastani Bratakatha and Satyanarayan Puja, as there was a superstitious belief that their presence would defile the rituals*.

However, my father secretly listened to these religious recitations and remembered everything.

There was an extreme level of exclusion in both schools and society, reinforcing caste-based atrocities. Schools sustained a culture of avoidance and exclusion, while communities fostered a communal practice of restricting *Dalit* people's access to religious places and social gatherings. These practices have isolated

Dalit people, leading them to endure various discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

Transition to a New School and Continued Education

After completing grade three, I attended classes at Shree Shakti Secondary School at grade four for initial 3-4 days. However, the school management denied my admission because the enrolment seats were full. Eventually, I enrolled in Shree Mahendra Jyoti Secondary School, where my roll number was 76. The transition was easier because my siblings and neighbours studied there. Their recommendations about my academic performance put me under pressure to excel in the new school. I secured second place in my grade four final examination. From grades five to ten, I consistently ranked first in my classes.

When I was in grade seven, our school organized *Saraswati Puja*. The following day, many students from the *Dalit* community did not attend school. During the school assembly, one of our teachers remarked, "*It seems that only people from lower castes celebrate festivals.*" We protested this discriminatory statement, and our schoolteacher later apologized. Acknowledging my good performance in school, teachers used to cite me as an example of a brilliant student. In many cases, to ensure my participation in inter-school extra-curricular activities such as essay writing, quiz competition, and speech competition, teachers visited my house on weekends or holidays.

My home also had an appealing environment for my learning and education. My father often organized handwriting competitions among my siblings and me, and he sometimes participated in them. As the youngest son, unlike my older siblings, I had to fewer household chores. Likewise, as I was one of the best performing students, my parents asked me to focus on education. The community setting was also conducive to our learning, as we practiced homework, reading, and other schoolwork together in a group. I reflect that this practice would have helped many of us from our community to excel in school. Our intra-community setting fostered an education environment whereas inter-community settings sustained caste-based discrimination.

The communities often sustained subtle discriminatory remarks that persisted, such as: "*Look how good the Gaine's children are in studies!"* or "*What do you feed your children that makes them excel academically?"* Though these statements motivated us as children, I later realized they were derogatory and discriminatory.

Challenges in Higher Education

As a member of the *Gandharva* caste, I observed exclusionary practices in both society and school. My community members and I faced caste-based untouchability in public spaces such as water taps, temples, and community feasts, and its severity was more in private spaces such as personal homes and kitchens. Furthermore, I heard from my father how he was treated unfairly in a school only because of his belonging to the *Dalit* community. He was forced to take his own mat inside the classroom, and was kept isolated, as it was believed that his contact with others may pollute them. I personally witnessed derogatory remark relating to the *Dalit* community by a schoolteacher while I was studying in grade seven. In public places such as taps, temples, and social events, untouchability remained prevalent. These experiences affected my confidence in interacting with teachers and competing with classmates, ultimately impacting my education.

My parents wanted me to study in science faculty after completing a school education, but no local colleges offered this field. My father enrolled me in a 10+2 college which was managed by one of our neighbours in Kathmandu Valley. I continued my 10+2 in the science faculty. However, I experienced significant challenges in managing my studies in Kathmandu. I feared the landlord when rent was due, and I had to negotiate college fees. As I lived in Nepaltar, Kathmandu, and needed to travel to my college in Manbhawan, Lalitpur, I had to manage high transportation costs. Likewise, when I was required to transition from Nepali-medium to English-medium instruction in college, my learning and understanding were compromised. I managed to complete my 10+2 despite these adversities.

After completing my 10+2, my family could not afford to continue my studies in Kathmandu. Hence, I returned to Gorkha. I believed my educational journey had ended. However, I managed to secure a government job in Kathmandu with my father's support. I worked there for 5 years, during which I realized the importance of higher education for career advancement. Subsequently, I enrolled in a bachelor's degree in humanities faculty at a community campus which was in Vanasthali, Kathmandu.

I remember having a tough talk with the campus administration about the availability of scholarships for students from marginalized communities. As a point of negotiation, the campus administration asked me to discuss the fee and scholarship issue after my enrolment in the campus. Before this, I had visited other campuses but

could not afford the fees. Fortunately, as the campus was in its first year and needed students, I received a full tuition waiver after securing top positions in several exams. I took my morning class from 6:00 to 9:30, travelled to the office, and worked from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM. In my final year of the bachelor's program, the campus administration decided to close the regular class due to low student enrolment. To manage my studies, I took extra classes at Ratna Rajya Multiple Campus, Kathmandu, in the morning from 6:00 to 9:00 and in the evening from 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM, without formal enrolment or payment. As a result of my hard effort, I completed my bachelor's program successfully.

After completing my bachelor's degree, my uncle supported me to apply for the Australia Award Scholarship for the master's level in 2012. I secured a scholarship after going through several rounds of selection. This opportunity enabled me to complete a Master of Arts in Community Development from Murdoch University in Western Australia. I reflect that my academic excellence helped me to get scholarships at both school and higher education levels, and these scholarships played a crucial role in my academic journey.

All other *Gandharva* are not lucky enough to receive support for their schooling and higher education. Many *Gandharva*, including myself struggle with economic hardship in their journey to school and higher education. Very few *Gandharva* receive scholarships, and many others are left out, leaving them excluded from mainstream education. The majority of *Gandharva* are compelled to engage in income-generation activities early, and higher education remains a distant dream for them. *Gandharva* as one of the *Dalit* castes still experience historical marginalization and discrimination based on caste-hierarchy of the Hindu Varna system, which restricts *Gandharva*' access to education, economic development, and decision-making roles. As a result of this multiplicity of exclusions, *Gandharva* remain segregated, which impacts their meaningful representation in higher education and professional sectors.

Statement of the Problem

One of the key challenges faced by *Dalit* including *Gandharva* in accessing quality higher education is the structural disparity in implementation of constitutional provision of free education with scholarships for *Dalit* including *Gandharva.* These include inadequate mechanism to translate policy into practice, puzzling the inclusion

agenda, sustaining caste-based hierarchies as part of social and cultural values, unequal power-relations among different social groups.

The existing body of literature predominantly focuses on structural barriers as a key impediment *Dalit*' access to higher education. These barriers include policy gaps, provision of and access to scholarship opportunities, and the existence of caste-based discrimination in schools. However, there is a dearth of empirical studies explaining how *Gandharva* youths experience, interpret, and respond to these challenges. There are a few studies about the *Gandharva* caste such as 'Can *Gandharva* Speak? A study of *Gandharva* songs and *Gandharva*: Origin and Performing Arts by Bharat Raj Dhakal, published in 2021 and 2017 respectively; *Gandharva* and Their Livelihood in Baglung District Nepal by Saroj Raj Panta, published in 2021; and Social Relationship and Change on Traditional Caste Identity of *Gandharva* by Bishnu Panthi, published in 2010. These studies mostly account for socioeconomic status, music and their performing arts, and so forth; however, there is a dearth of studies about the educational status of *Gandharva* and their journey to higher education.

The existing literature has focused much on the interpretation of macro-level challenges faced by *Dalit* community, including the inability to translate policy into practices. The literature assumes *Dalit* as a homogenous community and limits their recognition to endemic marginalization within its subgroups. Hence, the *Gandharva* community which is one of the most marginalized communities within in the *Dalit* community, remains excluded from education research. Therefore. This study fills this gap by exploring the lived experience of *Gandharva* youth in pursuing higher education.

There are limited studies about the status of *Dalit* communities' higher education in Nepal and the forms of barriers they face in their journey. The majority of the literature focuses on the existence of exclusion and reproduction of caste-based discrimination as key challenges in *Dalit*' access and participation in education. This study extends more knowledge in the field by using the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's socio-cultural capital and Foucault's power dynamics and explains how the system reproduces recurring exclusion from schools to higher institutions and how internal power dynamics in the society, socialization of both *Dalit* and non-*Dalit*, and peer pressure shape *Dalit*' educational aspirations and choices.

Due to lower representation of *Gandharva* in HE, they tend to get entangled in a vicious cycle of poverty and multiple forms of marginalization. Therefore, it is imperative to explore some important contributing contexts that incapacitate *Gandharva* from pursuing higher education - 1. What forms/types of social exclusionary practices contribute to the (un)achievement of higher education of *Gandharva*? 2. What are the contexts that hinder and support *Gandharva* to pursue higher education, despite the constitutional provision of free higher education with the scholarship? And 3. Why are more than 90% of *Gandharva* who passed secondary education not able to complete higher education (as a reference to my observation)?

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to uncover the experience of *Gandharva* about the pursuit of higher education in Nepal and explore how social exclusion and power relations contribute to the extent of *Gandharva*'s exclusion in HE in Nepal.

Research Questions

To explore *Gandharva'* perspectives on higher education in Nepal and the role of social exclusion and power relations in their (in)completion of higher education, I have two key research questions as outlined below.

- How do *Gandharva* experience social exclusion (inclusion) in the pursuit of higher education?
- How do power relations between *Dalit* and non-*Dalit* contribute to the exclusion of *Gandharva* in the pursuit of higher education?

Rationale of the Study

Constitutionally, *Gandharva*, who have a unique identity in Nepal, hold the right to get access to and complete higher education like other caste groups. However, a significantly lower number of *Gandharva* have succeeded in enjoying the subsequent rights. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the contexts associated with their pursuit of higher education so that the subsequent strategy can be adopted and executed to fulfil the constitutional aspiration.

An individual's socio-economic status is an important indicator of their positionality in society and is directly linked to their educational status. The *Gandharva*, who have a distinctive identity and position in Nepalese history, have a lower socio-economic status due to lower level of education, particularly higher educational. Quality higher education opportunity significantly contributes to increasing the socio-economic status of citizens (Organization for Economic Co-

operation and Development [OECD], 2018) and ensures high economic return (Reinders et al., 2020), utilizes full potential (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016), and helps to break the vicious cycle of poverty. OECD (2018) outlines that higher education significantly contributes to changing the social and economic status of marginalized people between their childhood and adulthood. The *Gandharva* have been caught in a vicious cycle of poverty due to multiple forms of exclusion. Therefore, *Gandharva*'s access to higher education and their graduation are of great importance to enable them to improve their socio-economic status and engage in the development of the country.

Higher education is a driver of "democratic socialization" (Reinders et al., 2020). The higher education system promotes a just society by creating a space for critiquing social values that impede equality, personal freedom, and independence thereby contributing to strengthening democracy (Post et al., 2004). To enable *Gandharva* to engage critically with the social values of discrimination and exclusion, raise a voice for equal and equitable opportunity, and contribute to social democracy, a study of the status of *Gandharva* in higher education takes on crucial importance.

Significance of the Study

The *Gandharva* is one of the most marginalized caste groups in the *Dalit* community, which has faced barriers to utilizing the educational, economic, and political opportunities guaranteed Nepal's constitution. Bhatta et al. (2008) contend that the institutionalization of equality in educational access and outcomes helps ensure subsequent equality in other sectors. Therefore, it is rational to conduct a study to uncover *Gandharva*'s perceptions of higher education, exploring the reasons and contexts that hinder and support *Gandharva*'s pursuit of higher education in Nepal. It leads to the enactment of appropriate policy measures to ensure the implementation of the constitutional provision for free higher education with a scholarship for *Dalit*, particularly for *Gandharva,* thereby enabling them to enjoy equal opportunities in education and other sectors in the future.

These study findings may have been useful for the researchers, policymakers at different levels, development organizations, and other stakeholders who wish to work for the advancement of *Gandharva* education. This study particularly supports the Government of Nepal (GoN) at the federal, provincial, and local levels in enacting the constitutional provisions on citizens' educational rights to the fullest extent, especially focusing on the *Gandharva* community.

Delimitation of the Study

In this research, following the categorization of formal education by the National Education Policy 2019, I counted higher education graduates who passed bachelor's degree or above.

Chapter Summary

The chapter began with the introduction to *Dalit* community, *Gandharva* community, their representation in formal education, both in school and higher education. This chapter includes the policy provision of government in supporting *Dalit*'s access to school and higher education. I started this study with my own experience from early childhood education to higher education, including my supporting contexts and barriers. Likewise, I problematized the issue of lower representation of Gandharva community in higher education, and unavailability of Gandharva-related academic study in higher education sector which laid foundation, rationalized and justified my study. Likewise, I presented my purpose, research questions, and the significance of the study to move forward with.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Gandharva people have minimal representation in higher education, due to ingrained social exclusionary practices in social, political, economic, and educational institutions. Social exclusion is an ethnocentric disposition and a social practice that keeps certain groups at the bottom of society (Venanzi, 2004). Social exclusion is a barrier to the exercise of civil, political, and social rights (Walker & Walker, 1997). Likewise, social exclusion is the exclusion from decision-making processes and from access to cultural integration (Madanipour et al., 1998). Therefore, social exclusion is the unfair treatment of certain groups of people or communities based on their ethnic origin or identity, preventing them from participating in decision-making and enjoying social and political rights. Caste-based hierarchy and subsequent discrimination have led *Gandharva* to be excluded from different sectors, including education. This has ultimately contributed to the under-representation of *Gandharva* in higher education.

The knowledge embodied in culture has always been mediated by a power that intentionally imposes one group's will on others. Likewise, power relations have played a key role in the development and maintenance of exclusion across every sector in Nepal, including higher education. The origin of caste-based discrimination and exclusion, its transformation over time, and the sustainability of the practices of exclusion and subjugation have been significantly shaped by the power relations because the culture is always mediated by the will of one group over others.

The National Education Policy 2019 categorizes higher education for Bachelor's degree and above (MoEST, 2019). The CEHRD (2018) shows that only 3% of *Gandharva* graduates have a Bachelor's degree or higher, which is very low.

Historical marginalization, systemic inequality, and the intricacy of power, poverty, and HE opportunities are pertinent to the sustained under-representation of *Gandharva* in higher education in Nepal.

Historical Origin of the Exclusion of the *Gandharva*

There are many myths about the origin of the *Gandharva*, but all agree on their sacred origin. The Rig Veda depicts *Gandharva* as devotees to the gods, mediators between the god and mortal sphere, guardians of holy spaces and traditions,

and supporters of maintaining order (Rig Veda, n.d.). In the Mahabharata, *Gandharva* were depicted as celestial beings, musicians, singers, and dancers living with the god Indra (Sonawane, 2025). Likewise, the Ramayana characterizes *Gandharva* as musicians and servants of the gods (Sonawane, 2025). In the Shiva Purana, *Gandharva* are depicted as heavenly clans, described as divine musicians serving the gods (Anjaneyulu, 2013).

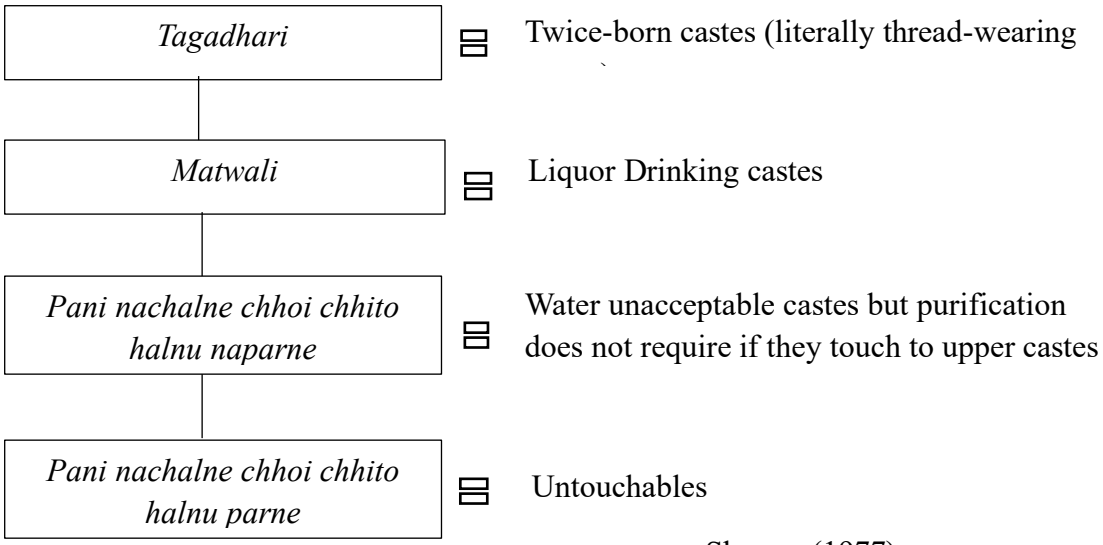
According to the Tribal Ethnography of Nepal, *Gandharva* is a descendant of the *Gandharva* Rishi, or hermit (Dhakal, 2017). Dhakal (2017) further notes that, according to Hinduism, Brahma, the god of creation, created four Rishis, and *Gandharva* was one of them. *Gandharva* Rishi was deceived by the plot of other Rishis, who gave him a cow leg and asked him to beg. The *Gandharva* Rishi degraded himself by using the leg of a cow and continued to live as a beggar (Dhakal, 2017). The Tribal Ethnography of Nepal shows that *the Gandharva* have their own beliefs and stories about their origins. It has been claimed that *the Gandharva* rishi, who was engrossed in the Apsara dance (dance of a heavenly beautiful angel), was assigned the task of singing and performing music (Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994, p. 218). The Hindu scriptures also discuss the *Gandharva,* whose role was to sing and play musical instruments in the palace of Indra (King of heaven). It is believed that the ancestors of the present *Gandharva* were supposed to migrate from Rajasthan in India, settled in Batulechaur of Kaski district, and scattered around other hilly districts of Nepal (K. Gandhari, personal communication, November 7, 2020). During the unification of Nepal by the king Prithvi Narayan Shah from Gorkha in the late 16th century, history explained the supporting role of Maniram Gaine (*Gandharva*); therefore, some argue that the origin of *Gandharva* was in the Gorkha district of Nepal (K. Gandhari, personal communication, November 7, 2020).

The *Gandharva* worked as minstrels, composed songs about gods, martyrs, wars, exploitation and suffering, poverty, and so forth, and sang them as they visited different places. The National Code of Conduct 1854 (*Muluki Ain*), influenced by the Hindu Varna System, placed *Gandharva* in the lowest caste category. Before the promulgation of the National Code of Conduct, there existed social divisions for functional purposes based on different religious scriptures, such as *the Manusmriti, the Yagyavahini, the Bhagvadgita, the Narada, the Brihaspati*, and so forth (Ministry of Law & Justice [MoLJ], 1965). The Hindu Varna System divided different caste groups under four Varnas, namely Bhrahmin (Priests), Kshatriya (Warriors), Vaishya

(merchants), and Sudra (labourers/service providers), and *Dalit* were placed at the bottom of the caste-structure under 'Sudra' Varna (Subedi, 2010). The varna system led to restricting occupational choice, which ultimately transmitted hereditary occupations across generations (Chandel, 2018). Chandel (2018) further asserts that the varna system strengthened occupational specialization within different castes. Subsequently, *the Gandharva* caste was assigned to singing and dancing, which led to their lower social status. The Muluki Ain 1854 provided a legal foundation for the caste-based hierarchy and social division, which categorized people into four varnas and 36 castes, as shown in Figure 1, with *Gandharva* at the lowest caste.

Figure 1

Caste-Hierarchy Perpetuated by the National Code of Conduct 1854



Sharma (1977)

The high caste groups such as *Brahmin, Rajput, Chhetri, Thakuri* caste groups listed under the '*Tagadhari*' (Twice-born and sacred-thread wearing), and below this category Nepali ethnic groups such as high-caste *Newar, Gurung, Magar*, and so on were placed as '*Matwali*' (Liquor drinking caste) category, low caste *Newars* and people from other religions other than Hindu were tagged as *'pani nachalne chhoi chito halnu napare'* (water unacceptable but water sprinkle does not require if touched), and low castes such as *Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gaine*, and so on categorized under *'pani nachalne chhoi chhito halnu parne*' (water unacceptable, water sprinkle requires to purify other if touched, also referred as 'untouchables'). The code provisioned discriminatory punishment based on the caste hierarchy. The code limited people's engagement in different areas, such as economic, social, cultural, and

economic in terms of their caste affiliation which subsequently led to creating inequality in society.

The *Gandharva* caste, which was categorized under the low caste, was not authorized to engage in educational activities. They did not have the opportunity to enhance their formal education due to social norms and values. Subsequently, due to the historical marginalization of *Gandharva* in educational and socio-economic discourse and its ongoing effects, there is currently minimal representation of *Gandharva* in higher education in Nepal.

Systemic Disparity

The constitution of Nepal 2015 and Universal Declaration of Human Rights define inclusion and access to education as two fundamental rights and they enshrine no discrimination based on any forms of personal and communal background (Stoian, 2024). Likewise, Nepal' Constitution, Nepal's Education Policy 2019, The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education 2018, Higher Education Policy 2015 have mandated inclusive and equitable education for *Dalit*. Despite these policy provisions, *Dalit* have been facing multiple forms of discrimination in society. This is primarily due to almost no representation of *Dalit* in policy formulation and implementation statutory bodies, the academic curriculum and policies influenced by the values of privileged caste-groups, leading to the systemic reproduction of caste-based discrimination and exclusion, and clear gaps between inclusion policy and practice (Chalaune, 2025).

The social structure is a result of networks and lasting relationships which follow a certain pattern, and it exists primarily in two forms: 1. 'Cultural norms, values, and historical legacies' that determine social practices of relationships, and 2. Systems and rules that define people's roles and responsibilities (Molla, 2018). Molla (2018) further argues that the set social structure may benefit some but exploit/marginalize others. Likewise, the HE opportunities for *Dalit* are limited, whereas they are adequate for others due to the ingrained social structure in Nepalese society. Following cultural norms and values, social groups accept and uphold different forms of inequality based on caste, gender, and ethnicity, which are unquestioned and transmitted from generation to generation, which Bourdieu calls 'habitus' (Molla, 2018). Therefore, structural inequality is a built mechanism where people with power and access have control over the resources and opportunities, and others are marginalized and disadvantaged. Hence, the historicity of social exclusion

is embedded in socio-cultural norms and social systems that become habitus and are incorporated into the governance structures. This has sustained discrimination in Nepalese society and so it does in Nepal's higher education.

In Nepalese society, upper caste people practice untouchability and caste-based discrimination against *Dalit,* and these practices have been embedded in the education sector as upper caste people have dominance in policy formulation and implementation areas related to education (Chalaune, 2025). Subsequently, the education curriculum and academic institutions reproduce caste-based discrimination. Hence, schools and other academic institutions have been one of the places that reproduce and transmit structural and systemic caste-based discrimination (Chalaune, 2025). Therefore, the education system, which has been shaped by dominant cultural values, has reproduced caste-based discrimination and sustained them in both society and academic institutions.

The historical marginalization of *Dalit* and the privilege of others have shaped today's society. Therefore, privileged groups hold dominance across all government statutory bodies, businesses, and other socially recognized and economically beneficial sectors (Gandhari, 2021). Hence, the current system reproduces a historically segregated society. This has sustained systemic caste-based discrimination and exclusion in almost every sector, and education is not an exception (Gandhari, 2021). Subsequently, *Dalit* students are still facing challenges to equitable access to formal education.

Bourdieu (1986) opines that humans use their social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital to sustain their power and influence in society. Similarly, the privileged caste-group who hold decision-making positions leverage their capital to strengthen exclusion and discrimination to sustain their supremacy and control over the society (Gandhari, 2021). Therefore, there is a lack of commitments and preparedness to translate inclusion policies into practices. For this, they tend to create ambiguity in policy provisions, delay the formation of a structural implementation mechanism, and rationalize opportunities based on competency and merit. Subsequently, the inclusion agenda becomes overshadowed, superficial, and confined to a policy provision. This has created a systemic barrier for *Dalit*, including *Gandharva,* to pursue higher education.

Higher Education System in Nepal

The formal education system in Nepal is divided into three levels. The pre-primary education or early childhood education and development (at least 1 year of pre-schooling before enrolling in grade 1), school education from grade 1-12, and higher education, including beyond the 12th grade (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2024a).

The key objective of higher education is to foster social and economic development in Nepal by developing qualified, competent, and skilled human resources that are research-oriented and capable of providing effective leadership (UGC, 2025). The parliament recently passed the Yogmaya Ayurveda University bill, and its operations have yet to begin. Universities in Nepal offer their higher education services in two types of campuses. One is constituent campuses, which have been managed directly by the university, including its financial management. The other one is affiliated campuses, which are affiliated with universities for education programming but managed and administered by private or community institutions. Currently, there are 1432 campuses (164 constituent, 723 privates, and 545 community) providing higher education facilities in different faculties in Nepal (UGC, 2024a). A total of 633,053 students are enrolled in higher education programs in Nepal (UGC 2024b). The universities in Nepal offer higher education in diverse academic programs, including education, management, social science, science and technology, humanities, law, engineering, forestry, medicine, agriculture, Ayurveda, and Sanskrit (UGC, 2024a). The higher education programs are structured in semester or annual system at the bachelor, master's, master of philosophy), depending upon course structure and requirement (UGC, 2024b). Furthermore, some universities also offer a postgraduate diploma (PGD) course in Nepal. Generally, based on the course structure, universities in Nepal offer 3-5 years of a bachelor's degree, 2 years of a master's degree, 1.5 years of an MPhil/PGD degree, and 3-5 years PhD degree, where English and Nepali are the medium of instruction (UGC, 2024b).

Looking at the history of university education in Nepal, Tri Chandra College, established in 1919, was the first institution to offer higher education (Upadhyay, 2018). However, only members of the Rana dynasty and those in power had access to the HE opportunity. The Campus was not accessible to all and the public. After the abolition of the Rana dynasty in 1950, the number of HE institutions remarkably increased (Upadhyay, 2018). Upadhyay further explains that, before the establishment

of Tri Chandra College, the Patna University of India curriculum was used in some classes in Kathmandu. He further asserts that Tribhuwan University, established in 1959, thereafter became the leading university in Nepal.

Despite the expansion of higher education opportunities in Nepal, a very nominal number of *Dalit*, only about 1.6% complete Bachelor's and above education. The statistical report on *Dalit* 2025 explained that various barriers, such as poverty, socio-cultural contexts, and other hidden factors, contribute to the lower representation of *Dalit* in higher education. In contrast, the GoN is unable to provide higher education opportunities at the convenience of marginalized communities, resulting in their nominal representation. Likewise, the education system in Nepal never recognizes *Gandharva*'s culture in the education curriculum, nor does the education structure seek to address the multifaceted challenges such as poverty, harmful socio-cultural practices, including caste-based discrimination and social exclusion barriers in the journey of their education. Subsequently, they fail to avail of the higher education opportunities guaranteed by Nepal's plans and policies.

Higher Education Policy of Nepal

Inspiring from the essence of inclusive higher education mandated by the Constitution of Nepal 2015, the higher education policy of Nepal 2015 seeks to ensure access to higher education for all who pass grade 12 or its equivalent level The policy envisions to manage open and distant education to increase accessibility to higher education, arrange support programs to ensure the inclusion of geographically disadvantaged regions, women, indigenous/ethnic communities, *Dalit*, marginalized groups, persons with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged communities in higher education. The higher education policy has also set implementation arrangements to ensure inclusivity in higher education. The policy aspires to arrange scholarships, concessional loans, and work-study provisions to ensure equitable access to higher education for economically talented and meritorious students, including *Dalit*, persons with disabilities, endangered ethnic groups, the indigenous community, and women. The policy identifies that the current scholarship provisions in higher education have not been adequate for the targeted group, such as *Dalit*.

In response to these policies, the UGC has formulated a Guideline on the Provision of Scholarships for Higher Education in 2022, which included scholarship provisions for *Dalit* and other marginalized groups (MoEST, 2022). The guideline provisions for the dissemination of scholarships through universities of Nepal and

their constituent and affiliated institutions. However, there is a disparity in the dissemination of scholarships to *Dalit* in many institutions. Likewise, the guideline includes age limitations at the bachelor's and master's levels, with 25 years and 30 years, respectively, which may limit the participation of many *Dalit* in accessing the scholarship. As many *Dalit* student, due to their economic and social challenges, face difficulty in completing their education early. The age limit may prevent them from benefiting from scholarship schemes in higher education. Moreover, UGC has been implementing financial support programs, such as scholarships, fellowships, thesis research grants, and research promotion, to enhance access to higher education (UGC, 2024a). The UGC has implemented special scholarships focusing on educationally disadvantaged *Dalit* communities (Badi, Chamar, Dom, & Musahar) in Engineering and medical disciplines, Scholarship to Children of Martyrs and Conflict Victims of Higher Education, Scholarship for Students with Disabilities, *Dalit*, Economically Deprived, Mukta Kamalari, and Female Muslim Students, Poverty Targeted Scholarship Program, and so on (UGC, 2024a). However, none of these scholarships have been awarded to *Gandharva* students to help with their higher education.

Existence of Exclusion in Higher Education of Nepal

Although higher education has experienced rapid growth since the establishment of Democracy in 1950, equitable access to HE opportunities has always been a challenge due to the control of resources by a handful of powerful individuals and its subsequent effect on social exclusion. Social exclusionary practices in society have led *Dalit* to face discrimination in schools, which ultimately led to the underrepresentation of *Dalit* in higher education. *Dalit* students face caste-based discrimination in classrooms by peers, teachers, and administrators, which leads them to drop out of school (Bishwakarma, 2011). Hence, the lower school completion rate among *Dalit* children results in lower representation of *Dalit* children in HE (Gandhari, 2021).

Simkhada (2007) illustrates various factors contributing to the existence of caste-based discrimination and exclusion in both schools and communities, ranging from inclusion policy failure to translating them in practices, nominal representation of *Dalit* in policy making, dominance caste group as a convenor of the reproduction and transmission of caste-based discrimination, and *Dalit* students' learning self-devaluation or their lower self-esteem has fueled their exclusion in education. Simkhada (2007) explains that *Dalit* students' dropout rate is significant despite the

government's scholarship program. The scholarship amount they receive is either half or insufficient to cover all education-related costs. A limited number of *Dalit* teachers have been recruited as a response to inclusion practices in schools. Even *Dalit* teachers have been continually facing caste-based exclusion, primarily in the religious event. The Kantipur News has covered a recent story of a discrimination faced by a *Dalit* teacher during *Saraswati Puja* (BC, 2082). BC (2082) reports that the chairperson of the school management committee put god's Tika on the forehead of others but placed it separately in leaf to the *Dalit* teacher. *Tika* is a symbol of god's blessing which normally contains rice grains, dyed red, and pure water, and is sprinkled to god's statue, and then worn in human's forehead as god's blessings.

Drawing on Ogbu's (1990) framework, Simkhada (2007) explains two types of barriers that influence students' learning achievement. One is instrumental barriers, which include direct and visible forms of discriminatory practices in the education sector, and the second is expressive, which involves the use of derogatory words and unfair treatment by the privileged groups to minority groups based on their caste identity. Likewise, the author explains various push-factors that drive *Dalit* students out from the school. These include, but are not limited to. the derogatory treatment of teachers in schools. Teachers use derogatory words; blame *Dalit* students for being slow in fulfilling academic requirement and for having poor sanitation and hygiene; blame the parents of *Dalit* students for being alcoholics and inactive; delegate them to cleaning related tasks and restrict them from serving in kitchen-related works, and embarrass and harass them based on their native language. Likewise, *Dalit* students have limited academic support at home and lesser job opportunities after education. Teachers as representatives of the government and dominant caste groups are insensitive to the pervasive and ubiquitous exclusionary practices and contribute to the reproduction and transmission of such practices. Simkhada (2007) further contends that there is a proportional relationship between inclusion and income and education levels. The higher the income and education level, the more respectful behaviour.

Nepal's universities have been spaces embedding enduring caste-based hierarchies and exclusion. Structural and symbolic discrimination persists in Nepal's universities, despite increased access for *Dalit* to higher education (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2023). The universities manifest subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion, such as social distancing, lower learning expectations for *Dalit*, and a lack of peer networks

(Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2023). Pfaff-Czarnecka (2023) argues that *Dalit* students' physical access to universities is insufficient to ensure their social acceptance and institutional support. The author further illustrates the importance of higher education in recognizing and transforming caste identities and hierarchical norms; however, it argues that such awareness has been contingent and shaped by various contexts, including class, language, and background. Maurya (2018) elaborates that the extent of discrimination has led *Dalit* students to drop out of higher education, and even to commit suicide in Indian HE institutions. In many of the Indian academic institutions, *Dalit* students experience caste-based discrimination, humiliation, and exclusion in higher education by their fellow students, faculty members, and administrators (Maurya, 2018). Their fellow students taunt *Dalit* students using "quota/reservation person", use derogatory remarks associating their caste identity, whereas faculty members and administrators are indifferent towards *Dalit* students in offering academic and other administrative support (Maurya, 2018). Likewise, *Dalit* students' tendency of learned self-devaluation, which is a tendency of accepting existing inequalities and discrimination as legitimate and fate-driven, restricts them from raising their voice against caste-based discrimination in higher education (Maurya, 2018). The data of 23 out of 25 suicidal cases in higher education were of *Dalit* in India during the period of 2007 to 2013, which demonstrates the pervasive caste-based discrimination in higher education (Maurya, 2018). Even if there is a dearth of studies on the extent of caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions in Nepal, given Nepal's and India's similar socio-cultural contexts, it can be argued that discriminatory practices and exclusion exist in HE institutions in Nepal (Gandhari, 2021). Hence, the discriminatory practices in academia pose a barrier for *Dalit* people to enter, sustain, and complete higher education, and the same is the case for *Gandharva* people.

Understanding Bourdieu's Social and Cultural Capital Theory

In this study, using a qualitative research approach, I have collected the lived experiences of *Gandharva* in pursuing higher education in Nepal. Our individual and group status has been determined by our social status, cultural knowledge, economic conditions, and the significance that we hold for generations. Therefore, I have used Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital to explain the hardships and challenges that *Gandharva* face in acquiring higher education in Nepal.

Bourdieu (1986), going beyond the traditional definition of capital in its economic sphere, contends that capital is an accumulation of both material things- such as money, property- and non-physical resources like personal behaviour or habits, knowledge, skills, and beliefs which an individual accumulates through their efforts over time. These accumulations exert people's identity, position, and influence in society. Bourdieu (1986) has explained different forms of capital- economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital, which an individual uses to mark their position in society.

Bourdieu (1986), in his theory of cultural and social capital, explains that economic capital is the physical resources an individual holds to benefit from society. These capitals may include money, property, and other physical wealth. Economic capital has a double, but adverse, impact on *Gandharva* communities. Firstly, the privileged caste-group which holds strong economic capital, use money and property to sustain their influence and control in the society, and weaken *Dalit* positions, strengthening discrimination. Secondly, *Dalit* have lower access to properties and wealth due to their historical engagement in menial jobs, which lower their social disposition and place them in the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Gandharva's lower economic status due to their dependence on traditional livelihoods such as crafting and selling *Sarangee* means they struggle to meet the educational opportunity costs, which ultimately creates a barrier to their journey to higher education. Likewise, *Gandharva* parents, due to their low financial status, expect a quick economic return from their youth, which results in early drop-out and halts the journey to higher education. Hence, the majority of *Gandharva* need immediate income to fulfil their day-to-day needs, leading them to leave school early, which fuels generational educational disadvantages for *Gandharva*.

Bourdieu (1986) elucidates cultural capital to explain a person's recognition, identity, and status in society. He contends that an individual's social disposition develops over time and is shaped by socialization, skills, knowledge, education, and other cultural practices. Bourdieu (1986) explains that there are three forms of cultural capital which an individual uses to get social position: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital refers to personal behaviour and mannerisms that develop over time. An individual develops their cultural capital through socialization and cultural practices, and it has a lasting impact on their social life. This form of cultural capital transfers generation to generation in a subtle way

and takes the form of 'symbolic capital', which legitimizes these behaviours over time. In the context of education, *Gandharva* community holds a strong cultural capital in the form of skills, arts, musical expression, and cultural traditions. However, the current education system values and prioritizes measure learning outcomes which is largely disconnected from Gandharva's indigenous cultural knowledge, musical skills and inherited wisdom. Hence, *Gandharva* have been facing challenges in meeting curricular requirement and mastering in formal education.

As a result of historical marginalization in the education sector, like other *Dalit*, many of the *Gandharva* are illiterate or have minimal educational attainment. Therefore, they cannot provide an educational culture for their children. Hence, their cultural transmission related to education has weakened over the generations, resulting in lower representation of the *Gandharva* in both schools and higher education. Likewise, there is a clear misalignment between *Gandharva*'s cultural identity and Nepal's education system. The higher education curriculum of Nepal hasn't integrated *Gandharva*'s history and cultural knowledge, nor has any literature explained the significance of *Gandharva*'s culture in enriching Nepali culture. This has alienated *Gandharva* from mainstream Nepalese history and culture, reinforcing detachment from the education system as well. This has posed a cultural challenge for *Gandhrvas*, requiring them to align with the education system and pursue higher education. Likewise, *Gandharva* face multiple forms of marginalization, such as medium of instruction, discriminatory curriculum, and environment in educational institutions, leading to early drop-out and challenges in pursuing higher education.

Bourdieu (1986) also opines that objectified cultural capital has a significant role in shaping personal social status. Objectified cultural capital is goods that relate to an individual's culture, such as musical instruments, books, arts, songs, and so forth. These cultural goods embody cultural values and confer societal benefits. Furthermore, an individual requires skills and knowledge to fully benefit from cultural goods. Nepali culture has dignified the *Brahmin* as a caste and their Hindu religious books and slogans. *Brahmins* (so-called high caste) reserved the rights and skills to interpret such religious books, and the skills have been transmitted through generations, keeping them as a controlling agent for religious discourse. In contrast, the Nepali culture banned *Dalit* from participating in such religious discourse, which resulted in keeping *Dalit* as inferior castes in Nepal's caste hierarchy.

Gandharva has its own culture and tradition. However, the prevailing formal education system has hardly integrated *Gandharva*'s musical instrument, *Sarangee*, and their historical songs in its curricula. This has prevented *Gandharva* from owning Nepal's education and acquiring formal education.

Institutionalized cultural capital is another form of cultural capital that Bourdieu explains, highlighting how talent and ability have been measured against formal education. An individual's personal academic qualifications have been presumed indicators of competence and excellence, and prerequisites for jobs. Like the *Dalit* communities, *Gandharva* do not hold many academic qualifications, preventing them from acquiring so-called respectful and high-level jobs. Due to their lower educational attainment, *Gandharva* have been perceived as a low-caste group, earning less than others. This perceived cultural capital has led *Gandharva* to crash into the viscosity of poverty and lower levels of education.

Social Capital refers to the benefits an individual gets from their connections and networks in society (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital provides both the material and non-material advantages to an individual, such as opportunities, recognition, and prestige respectively. People make connections and networks based on mutual trust, obligations, shared responsibilities for mutual benefits, and collect people with similar backgrounds and status. The society has distinctive names for various connections, such as political parties, ethnic and caste groups, families, and elite groups. In many cases, there is a strict boundary to entry into certain social groups, such as caste groups and elite groups. Within the context of caste hierarchies, privileged caste groups uphold exclusive networks and social circles, which are based on similar sociocultural status and shared beliefs. These groups strategically use their social, economic, and cultural capitals to maintain systemic control, giving them significant influence over social structures and cultural norms. The effects of this dominance are also seen in formal education, where *Dalit* and *Gandharva* communities are further marginalized by institutional practices and curricula that frequently mirror and uphold caste-based disparities.

The *Gandharva* lacks the social capital to expand its educational journey. The most recent generation of *Gandharva* has begun a journey toward higher education. However, they don't have their elder family members to guide and advise them on their journey to higher education. As one of the most marginalized and excluded communities, *Gandharva* do not have professional circles to showcase the way to

higher education and the advantages of having higher education for their successful future. Hence, as *Gandharva* has limited social capital- networks, academic circles, and connections- they lack opportunities to gain societal benefits to advance their educational and professional career.

Bourdieu (1986) contends that symbolic capital is a socially recognized and legitimized capital which can be used to gain respect, prestige, status, and honour in society. Other forms of capital, such as economic, cultural, and social capital, can form symbolic capital when society values and recognizes them as legitimate authority. Such symbolic capital in a caste system appears to have a sustaining impact in reproducing the social inequality for *Dalit*, including *Gandharva*.

The *Gandharva*'s culture and occupation have been symbolically recognized as menial throughout the generations. *Gandharva* has witnessed much symbolic violence in society. There is widespread stigma surrounding *Gandharva*'s *Sarangee* occupation. Their occupation has been widely regarded as a menial job; hence, *Gandhrava* students do not feel comfortable bringing their cultural expertise into a cultural setting. Moreover, in the workplace, *Gandharva* feel discriminated against, as they are sometimes asked to change their surnames to gain social acceptance and respect. The majority of *Gandhavas* believe that their educational status does not change their social status, which discourages them from pursuing academic and professional careers. Hence, these forms of symbolic violence normalize discrimination as a part of social norms and values, which are barriers to higher education and employment for *Gandharva.*

The existing cultural and social capital has been reproducing systemic barriers to education for *Gandharva*. *Gandharva* face systemic barriers to access to and completion of higher education in Nepal, primarily due to the inability of Nepal's education policies to address the deeply rooted caste-based discrimination. Different incidents of caste-based discrimination are prevalent in schools and societies, perpetuating exclusion. The majority of educational institutions in Nepal focus on profit-making, neglecting equity, which has resulted in systemic barriers to access for students of marginalized communities. Likewise, historically, through the promulgation of legal policies and social rules, *Gandharva* were restricted from pursuing education, reinforcing generational disadvantage. Therefore, there were/are systemic barriers that hindered *Gandharva* from pursuing higher education, which has been a key factor in reproducing social inequality for *Gandharva*.

Research Gap

There are limited studies about *Gandharva* in Nepal. The study primarily focuses on the unnoticed, unrecognized, and undervalued *Gandharva* arts and their deteriorating socioeconomic status. Dhakal (2017) flags that *Gandharva*'s folk songs reflect their experience and suffering under societal domination and suppression. Likewise, Dhakal (2021) highlights that the *Gandharva* and their culture and arts have been indifferent towards other communities despite their sacred lineage, significant contributions to Nepal's unification, and their enriching role in Nepali music. Panta (2021), in his study of *Gandharva* and their livelihood in Baglung district of Nepal, outlines the occupational shift of *Gandharva* from their traditional singing and playing *Sarangee* to wage labour, masonry, and so forth due to two reasons: insufficient income from their traditional occupation and unrecognition and hatred towards it. Likewise, Dhungana (2017) sheds light on the socioeconomic status of *Gandharva* living in Batulechaur, Pokhara, Nepal, and concludes that *Gandharva* have been changing their occupations towards labour migration and other unskilled jobs due to their lower educational status and traditional low-income professions. These studies highlight the low educational attainment of *Gandharva* as one of the causes of their poverty. However, there is a dearth of studies that illustrate the educational status of *Gandharva*, the contexts contributing to their lower representation in school and higher education, and their impact on their lives.

Therefore, this study aims to provide insight into the contexts that contribute to the lower representation of *Gandharva* in higher education and into the experience of *Gandharva* in pursuing higher education in Nepal.

Chapter Summary

I began this chapter with illustrating the historical origin of exclusion of *Gandharva* based on the Hindu Varna System in reference to the promulgation and enactment of the National Code of Conduct 1854, where Gandharva as one of the untouchables was kept at the bottom of the caste hierarchy which limited their participation in education sector along with other development opportunities. Likewise, I outlined how systemic disparity strengthened exclusion and posed barriers for Gandharva in pursuing higher education. The systemic barriers included inadequate representation in decision-making and policy processes, reproduction and transmission of the values of the privileged caste through academic discourses. To explore the marginalization of *Gandharva* in higher education, I tried to analyse and

interpret them through the lens of exclusion. I presented how different forms of capital play roles in shaping *Gandharva*'s social status and their relation to *Gandharva*'s struggle in pursing higher education.

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I have narrated my experience pursuing higher education, which marked the start of my research journey. I have problematized the journey to higher education of the *Gandharva* people, exploring the contributing contexts, including both the challenges and supports. I have further taken into account philosophical considerations- narrative inquiry, qualitative methodological approaches. I have also presented a research paradigm, research methods, selection of the research location and research participants, data collection, analysis, and interpretation approaches, quality standards, and ethical considerations that I considered during my research.

Philosophical Consideration

In this research, my ontological disposition is historical realism, as multiple contexts contribute to the social exclusion of *Gandharva* in higher education, including their economic, socio-cultural, and symbolic capitals, as well as historicity, systemic inequality, caste-based discrimination in HE institutions, and so forth. Historical realism holds that reality is created through the interaction among social, cultural, political, ethnic, gender, and religious factors that shape the social system (Scotland, 2012).

The majority of *Gandharva* still depend on their traditional musical occupation for their livelihood. As their traditional occupation is not enough for their livelihood, they have started to change their occupation; however, due to a lower level of education and skills, they engage in low-paid, unskilled occupations. Consequently, *Gandharva* has a low economic status, which has resulted in their lower position in the community. Likewise, the Rigveda outlines a mythical origin of four castes, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra, where Sudra was considered emerging from the leg of Purusha, a Hindu mythological character. Since Sudra includes castes from the *Dalit* community including *Gandharva*, their social positions are considered derogatory. This has provided a foundation for the exclusion of *Gandharva*. In addition, the Muluki Ain of 1854 legitimized the caste-based labour division, placing *Gandharva* at the bottom of the social hierarchy, leading them to engage in menial jobs. This has further solidified caste-based exclusion and discrimination for *Gandharva*.

Likewise, because of historicity and its generational transmission, Dalit has limited access to power, resource and knowledge, whereas privileged caste-group has significant control over them. These inequal distributions of power and resource among *Dalit* and other communities are responsible to sustain caste-based discrimination and exclusion. In addition, *Dalit* are subjected to caste-based discrimination and exclusion in a variety of sector, including education, because of unequal distribution of socioeconomic and cultural capital among different caste-groups. Hence, there are multiple contexts contributing to the marginalization of *Dalit*, including *Gandharva*.

To understand the social exclusion of *Gandharva* in higher education, I used critical epistemology, which helped to unearth the relationships between 'power and thought, and power and truth claims' (Carspecken, 1996, p. 11). Michel Foucault explains that power influences and guides societal norms, values, and procedures, and ultimately shapes individual and communal thought (Goswami, 2014). Furthermore, Foucault asserts that each society has its own definition of truth, mediated by power, and that it institutionalizes truth rituals (Goswami, 2014). Likewise, Foucault writes that power and knowledge are inseparable, continually influencing, reproducing, and strengthening one another (Goswami, 2014).

In the Nepali context, certain caste-groups are in a centre of power and have been instrumental in developing and sustaining caste-based hierarchies. Through the exercise of different forms of power, such as social, cultural, economic, symbolic, and institutional power, caste-based division, disaggregation, and discrimination have been legitimized for a long time. As a result of the generational transmission of these practices, caste-based hierarchies have been accepted, imposed and enacted without question. Subsequently, caste-based hierarchy continues to shape social positioning where Dalit holds lower position. In the context of *Gandharva*, they have been historically defined and categorized as a lower/*Dalit* caste group, and both the non-*Dalit* and the *Gandharva* caste have accepted them as part of the social and cultural norms. Historically, through the promulgation of the Muluki Ain in 1910, *Dalit*, including *Gandharva*, were banned from pursuing education, resulting in their lower representation in the education sector. Hence, in this study, I have analysed how unequal distribution of power among *Dalit* and others sustain the domination of *Dalit*, including *Gandharva*, in the education sector. Likewise, I have also analyzed how direct and subtle forms of power have been exercised such as rationalizing

competency and merit-based education, misinterpreting and tokenizing the inclusion agenda to sustain discrimination in formal education.

In this research, to gain knowledge, to understand the multiple realities that only a few *Gandharva* succeed in taking the journey to higher education, and to unfold historical realism to support and stop *Gandharva*'s journey to higher education, I have used narrative inquiry as my epistemological standpoint. These standpoints include economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, as suggested by Bourdieu, while analysing the experience and narratives of *Gandharva* in pursuing higher education.

In this research, I have valued my research participants' experiences, presented them as they are, and reviewed my positionality time and again to avoid bias (Belem et al., 2020). I was always aware that my experience as a member of the *Gandharva* community might influence my positionality, and hence, I have assessed and reviewed my positionality for the quality research investigation.

Critical Research Paradigm

I have used the critical research paradigm as an epistemological disposition, enabling me to analyze the historical, social, and cultural backdrops and the role of power in the underrepresentation of *Gandharva* in higher education. The critical research paradigm is a process of identifying asymmetrical power relations that stimulate the exclusion of *Gandharva* from decision-making in the political arena and result in underrepresentation in higher education. By using this epistemology, we have sought to deconstruct systemic inequalities and marginalization built into social structures and to contribute to social change for social justice (Reese, 2024).

Social reality has been constructed through social and historical backdrops and is mediated by power relations (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Likewise, in this research, I have sought to uncover the role of power relations in sustaining the unjust social practices that exclude *Gandharva* from higher education.

In a critical paradigm, a researcher's beliefs and thoughts, which are products of power hegemony, impact epistemic disposition, the selection of methodology and methods for conducting research, information collection, interpretation, and meaning-making (Madison, 2005). Hence, in this research, my value orientation has guided the research process, and my experience as a member of the same community has simultaneously shaped the exploration of the contexts that contribute to the underrepresentation of the *Gandharva* community in higher education.

Research Method

In this research, I have used narrative inquiry as my research methodology. Connelly and Clandinin are pioneers in the use of narrative inquiry as a research method in educational settings and argue that it is the study of how humans live and experience the world (Wei, 2023). Wei (2023) further explains that narrative inquiry is about human experience, that stories are about people they witness and live with, and that these stories can research human experience of the world. Furthermore, Wei opines that narrative researchers should collect, describe, reinterpret, share, and retell the people's lived experience about the world, construct and reconstruct personal and societal stories, for the sake of meaningful learning for individuals and communities. It is also important to note that narrative inquiry involves all stakeholders, provides them with an opportunity to share their voices and stories, and collaboratively reflects the meaning-making (Wei, 2023).

Pino Gavidia and Adu (2022) describe narrative inquiry as a process of better understanding phenomena, in which researchers, as co-participants, co-construct knowledge with participants in specific times and places. They further elucidate two different philosophical paradigms in narrative inquiry- (i) interpretive paradigm within constructivism emphasizing construction of reality through individual experience, and knowledge generation through subjective participation in meaning making processes; (ii) critical paradigm with in social constructionism, assumes that meaning is out there is the society and is shaped by different forces- social, cultural, political, economic, and historical. This paradigm echoes the idea that social reality is mediated through power relations and other contextual forces, shaping the lived experience.

In this research, I have used the critical paradigm of narrative inquiry to unfold the contexts contributing to barriers to higher education for *Gandharva*. As explained by Bourdieu, *Gandharva* face layered challenges and obstacles in their journey, primarily due to their limited access to financial resources (referred as economic capital), exclusion of *Gandharva*'s cultural knowledge in formal education system (referred as cultural capital), limited connections with informal networks to advance their academic and professional career (referred as social capital), existence of caste-based discrimination in social and education setting (reproduction of social inequality), and existence of workplace discrimination and stigmatization of traditional occupation of *Gandharva* (referred as symbolic capital). Thus, the status of

higher education among *Gandharva* has largely been shaped by different societal power dynamics, which have engendered practices, systems, and conditions that lead to their marginalization (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

Study Area and Selection of Research Participants

In this research, I purposefully selected *Gandharva* who have completed and dropped out of the journey to HE, assuming that they can share their stories of the journey to HE, including challenges and support contexts.

My journey to higher education and accomplishment also inspired me to conduct this study. Furthermore, I wanted to understand the journeys of other *Gandharva* to higher education, thinking that their stories could be helpful and meaningful for individuals and communities. I purposefully selected my research participants who were willing to participate and respond. I have selected four research participants and included my own experience in this research. Of the five participants, I am doing an MPhil; one is a PhD scholar; two completed a bachelor's degree; and the remaining one completed a music therapy course but did not complete a bachelor's degree.

Meeting my Participants

From the beginning of preparing my research proposal, I had some names in mind for my research participants. After I defended my proposal, I communicated with the possible participants for my research via mobile.

I scheduled the meeting participants in three phases: a preliminary visit to the community sites, an in-depth interview and discussion, and a follow-up and reconfirmation meeting with research participants. I conducted a preliminary visit to the *Gandharva* settlement in Dumre Bhansar, Tanahun district, on January 28 and 29, 2023, to understand the *Gandharva* community's setting and culture and to identify my research participants. I also discussed with the mother of Mr. Musician, the father of Mr. Leader, and two other *Gandharva* who were crafting Sarangee during my visit. Mr. Musician is doing his Masters in Rural Development in Ratna Rajya Multiple Campus and Mr. Leader is pursuing his master's from Saraswati Multiple Campus in Kathmandu. My discussion focused on the contexts and barriers that affect their children's pursuit of higher education. Likewise, I also discussed how they understand higher education and what (un)supporting contexts are impacting their children's higher education.

Bhansar *Gandharva* village was located around 2 kilometers north of the Dumre Bazaar, linked by a paved road. It is situated uphill from Bhansar, surrounded by a community forest. The villagers usually go to Dumre Bazaar for shopping, education, health, and other opportunities. Some villagers own their vehicles (motorbikes) to access the market at Dumre Bazaar. In the surroundings of *Gandharva* village, there are the Tamang, Kunwar, *Gandharva*, Gurung, and Pariyar communities, among others, from north to west. The community shares a specific geographic location and follows its own culture and tradition.

During community observation, I talked with one of the *Gandharva* who was crafting *Sarangee*. In response to my question on the importance of higher education, he replied *"Ultimate goal of education is to earn, I am earning money by crafting and selling Sarangee. Why should I spend long time and invest more in education?"* This flagged me that *Gandharva* youths prioritize earning over education.

The villagers value education but not very much. They think that a person must have an economic benefit and/or return either through education or through any other means. Dropping out from schools is not a big deal for them rather they look for economic return from the individuals. As far as they contribute to earnings and livelihood by any means, they do not care whether they are educated or not.

Despite parental educational status, they prefer sending children to school, primarily to boarding school for quality education and better facilities. As far as their income can afford, they want to send their children to good schools. A mother of Mr. Musician shares her story of how she supported his son for education. She shares,

> *I run a small shop here and earn money for our livelihoods. I send my grandson to a boarding school. Even for my son, I did not involve him in household work during his schooling. I thought education would bring him and us prosperity. I am also supporting my two daughters for their after-school education.*

In response to how she understands higher education, she replies, *"I do not know how much my son should study, but I will support his education as far as I can".*

Parents provide support for their children's education despite their limited understanding of its importance. Parents know 'education is important' but do not know why this is important. Parents do not even know what higher education is. According to them, the high school in Nasetar, about 2 km from Salbisne (where *the Gandharva* community lives), offers higher education; however, it only goes up to

Grade 12. Early age marriage is prevalent in this community, and the marriage has increased the burden on them and prevents them from continuing their studies. It looks like they recognize the importance of sons' higher education relative to daughters. The government's scholarship has supported *Gandharva* in starting their after-SLC education, but due to a lack of a monitoring mechanism, its effectiveness is in question. However, the scholarship amount helps *Gandharva* to sustain in Kathmandu. Together with Mr. Managal, the majority of households have some livelihood means, such as mobile shops, chicken farming, and *Sarangee* manufacturing, which have provided a regular income. This has been a great support for their livelihood.

There are other communities, such as the Magar, Tamang, Gurung, and Kumal communities, near the *Gandharva* community. Seeing the strong market for *Sarangee*, other community members have been learning to craft wooden *Sarangee* and selling them to Mugling and music shops. A large *Sarangee* costs about NRs 2000, whereas a small *one* costs NRs 800. The Magar house, which is very near to the *Gandharva* community, serves multiple functions, such as *Sarangee* crafting, Momo, tea, and snacks selling, alcohol making, and Ludo playing. The majority of *Gandharva* go there to have a cup of tea and snacks. The Magar household earns a good income from all these activities.

There are no academic institutions nearby to offer quality higher education (bachelor's and above); hence, students have only two options: either to stop their studies or to go to Damauli, Pokhara, or Kathmandu for higher education.

I listed some possible research participants for my research. I called and texted 10 research participants, including 2 women. I wanted to collect the stories of *Gandharva* who completed their higher education, assuming they have their own stories, including the supporting and challenging contexts of their journey to higher education. Despite frequent follow-ups, I was able to collect the stories of four *Gandharva*.

Mr. Leader

I met Mr. Leader on 11th June 2023, at the *Sarangee* Veg Restaurant in Thamel, Kathmandu, at 17:00. He returned after the musical show at the Kathmandu Guest House in Thamel, which was near the *Sarangee* Restaurant. Mr. Leader was running the *Sarangee* restaurant as a community restaurant. The *Sarangee* restaurant was established with the financial support of foreigners, with the objective of

investing profits in the betterment of needy *Gandharva* children in terms of their health and education.

Mr. Leader was born in 1994 in Bhansar, Tanaun district of Nepal. He completed his preschool studies at a local boarding school in Bhansar, Tanahun. Later, he completed basic education in Satyawati Devi Basic School, which was near his house in Bhansar. He completed his upper and lower secondary level (Grades 9-10) in Bhansar. He faced some discriminatory practices like exclusion in religious rituals like the *Saraswati Puja* in a school.

He shifted to Kathmandu for further studies and completed 10+2 and a bachelor's degree in management from Saraswoti Multiple Campus. He is continuing his master's degree in the same faculty on the same campus. Mr. Leader migrated to Kathmandu for two reasons: to earn alongside his father, who was already in Kathmandu, and to continue his after-school education.

I reached out to Mr. Leader on 23rd of November 2025 through WhatsApp, asking for his date of birth. Likewise, I called him to verify the names of the institutions he studied at for his school and university education. Likewise, I briefed him about the themes I have generated based on the narratives of different *Gandharva*.

Mr. Therapist

I met Mr. Therapist on February 10, 2024, at 5:00 PM on the premises of Kathmandu Guest House, Thamel, Kathmandu, where he was performing a volunteer musical show with other colleagues. He is teaching as a musical therapist in some places for children with autism. Likewise, he is also running a small business in Thamel and performing musical concerts at Kathmandu Guest House in Thamel from 5:00 PM for 2 hours daily.

Mr. Therapist was born in 1984 in Dharapani, Gorkha. He has two siblings- one younger sister and one younger brother. He started his formal education from Bal Mandir School, Gorkha, from 'Sisku Kakchhya' (a one-year early childhood education). He completed his School Leaving Certificate (SLC) from Shakti Secondary School in Gorkha in 2000. After SLC, he and his parents shifted to Kathmandu for his further education and livelihood. From Saraswati Multiple Campus located in Lainchaur Kathmandu he completed his intermediate in Management and dopped-out from bachelor's level. He earned by playing and selling *Sarangee* in Thamel and continued his studies.

I contacted Mr. Therapist three times through Facebook Messenger to verify that the information was correctly collected and narrated. Again, I met with him on the 29th of December 2025 at the Kathmandu Guest House, where he was performing at 6:30 PM. After his performance, I walked to his musical shop in Thamel and shared the narrative I had prepared. I also shared the themes I have created through the triangulation of narratives from different research participants.

Mr. Development Expert

I met with Mr. Development Expert on 12th of February 2024 at Country Coffee, Basundhara, Kathmandu at 13:00. He returned after attending a meeting of a Non-Government Organization (NGO from 7:00 AM to 12:45 PM. Mr. Development Expert is a global staff member of VSO International and works in the Education sector and has more than two decades of experience in the international development sector. He has been working closely with key joint financing partners to strengthen the education sector in Nepal. He is well aware of the paradigm shift in the development sector from service-based to profit- or delivery-focused, driven by the rise of international contractors in the subsequent sector.

Mr. Development Expert was born in Rainas Takughat, Lamjung, and completed his school education there. He was a good student from the very beginning and placed first in most classes until Grade 5. He completed his SLC at the local school and moved to Kathmandu for further studies. He joined Mr. Therapist Science Campus located in Lainchaur, Kathmandu, and continued his intermediate education in the Science faculty. He later continued his study in Prithvi Narayan Campus in Pokhara and completed his intermediate and bachelor's degree in education. He completed his master's degree in education from Tribhuwan University. Mr. Development Expert witnessed various discriminatory practices, such as being bound to touch water pots in a school, being compelled to change his surname in his job, and exclusion from social feasts.

After retrieving Mr. Development Expert's narratives, I texted him on 23rd November 2025 via Facebook Messenger, asking for additional information about his journey to higher education. The additional information included his date of birth, the institutions where he pursued his intermediate, bachelor's, master's, and PhD education, the faculties he chose at the subsequent levels, and the dates of his graduation at those levels. I texted the same message to him on WhatsApp as well, and he responded to my queries dated 1st of December 2025.

Mr. Musician

I met Mr. Musician at the Northfield Café in Thamel, Kathmandu, on 14th March 2024 at 6:00 PM, before his performance at the café. Mr. Musician has been a music teacher at Swarnadip Boarding School, Tarkeshwor, Kathmandu, since 2022. He does a musical practice. He runs online and offline music classes. He has six students in his online classes and teaches them one or two times a week. He connects his online participants via platforms like Facebook and TikTok. Currently, Mr. Musician does not have students for in-person classes; however, he used to have some earlier. He also plays *Sarangee* at Northfield café every evening from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM, together with his own traditional musical band. Mr. Musician is currently pursuing a Master's in Anthropology (Cultural Anthropology) at Ratna Rajya Campus. He spends most of his time with music.

Mr. Musician was born in 1990 and began his formal education at Satyawati Debi Lower Secondary School, a government school in Bhansar, Tanahun. He enrolled in Sisu Kakchhya (a one-year ECD) and studied up to grade two. With the hope of providing quality education, Mr. Musician's parents enrolled him in Tahanun Children's Boarding Home, a kindergarten-level boarding school, where he studied up to grade two. a boarding. Mr. Musician again shifted to a government school due to armed conflict in 1997 onwards, when all the private and boarding schools shut down. Mr. Musician completed lower basic education (up to Grade 8) at the government school near his home. He completed his SLC from Hom Raj Lohani Sarad Sikchhya Sadan Secondary School, Nasetar, Tanahun, which was 45 45-minute walking distance from his home. As his father was in Kathmandu for work, Mr. Musician moved there for further education and work. He completed his intermediate and bachelor's degree in the Humanities faculty from Ratna Rajya Multiple Campus located in Pradarshani Marga near Old Buspark, Kathmandu.

Through Facebook Messenger, I reached Mr. Musician to verify his journey to school and higher education. On 23rd November 2025, I verified his date of birth and his affiliation with early schools. Likewise, on 29th November 2025, I collected information on the type of wood that *Gandharva* use to make *Sarangee*. I met Mr. Musician in person on the 29th of December 2025, during which I verified, corrected, and added his narratives about his journey to higher education.

Quality Standards

I have applied qualitative standards throughout the research process to ensure quality in my study. I have focused on trustworthiness, carried out reflexivity, and considered key narrative inquiry elements of temporality, sociality, and spatiality. I have taken account of credibility, transferability dependability and confirmability. I have considered the time, conditions, and places of my research participants while developing narratives, which have helped me provide a holistic picture of *Gandharva*'s experience in pursuing higher education.

Trustworthiness

In a qualitative study, elements such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability contribute to ensuring the reliability of findings, which are crucial for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Ahmed, 2023). In my study, I spent a significant amount of time conducting field observations, building relationships with research participants, reflecting on my possible biases in information collection, analysis, and interpretation, and triangulating information through interviews, field observations, and so forth. All these efforts helped ensure the credibility of my study. Likewise, for transferability, as Ahmed suggested, I prepared detailed notes outlining the research participants' narratives. Furthermore, I also noted the viewpoint of those *Gandharva* who completed and did not complete higher education. For dependability, I explained and documented the research processes, recorded the interviews of research participants, and reflected on my personal viewpoint and analysis after the interview in my study, which helped to ensure transparency and ease the replication of these research processes. Likewise, I also shared my research findings with research participants to ensure the confirmability of my study.

Besides, to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation, I applied member checking (Buchbinder, 2010), peer debriefing, and noting the feelings experienced (Carspecken, 1996). Buchbinder (2010) asserts that member checking is a key technique to ensure credibility, which entails verifying the interpretation of information with research participants. This process enhanced and preserved the authenticity of results that verified the interpreted data by research participants and validated the information. Likewise, the data is readily available for review, scrutiny, and verification to ensure the transparency and trustworthiness of data interpretation.

Reflexivity

In this research study, I adopted critical reflexivity as a quality standard. Reflectivity is a process of limiting the researcher's values on the research content (Davies, 1999). Reflexivity is looking back on one's own experience, and a continuum of reflection enables one to acquire awareness of the social construction of self and others. Foley (2002) asserts that critical reflexivity urges researchers to critically examine the relationship between researchers and research participants to explore multiple dimensions of discrimination and produce more reliable and justifiable interpretations. Hence, I continually reflected on the field notes and examined how my experience and journey to higher education shaped my way of interpretation. How have my values guided my interpretations of field reality?

Furthermore, I analyzed how my opportunities throughout the journey to higher education have guided the interpretations and analysis of field findings. Through the continuum of reflexivity, I balanced an interpretation of my personal experience and field observation separately to avoid mutual influence.

Miled (2017) discusses two forms of reflexivity: "1. Reflection on the researcher's biases, and 2. Reflection on the dialectic relationship between structural/historical forces and human agency". Likewise, in my research, I reflected on how I influenced the field's findings and interpretation. I also reflected on how the historical development of caste-based ostracism and a hegemonic, systemic structure influenced the development of *Gandharva*'s human agency. Following Madison (2005), my reflexivity covered reflecting on myself about a selection of research purposes and frameworks, predicting the possibility of harm to research participants, means of dialogues with others/research participants, a connection of local stories to the bigger philosophical meaning, and other human beings, and the way it contributes to deconstructing power asymmetry and establishing social justice.

Temporality

Temporality implies that individual stories develop and unfold over time. Focusing on temporality enables researchers to consider, examine, and evaluate the past, present, and future of the people, places, and events under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). I have explored the adversities, challenges, supportive contexts, and resilience of my research participants in the course of their educational journey, shaped by their past experiences as they generate meaning from their narratives. In my study on the experience of *Gandharva* in higher education, I accounted for and

considered their multifaceted and intersectional challenges and supporting contexts from school through higher education.

Likewise, at the end of each day, I prepared observation notes to ensure the key essence of the observation and conversation was well maintained. At the end of each day of field study, I reviewed field notes and observation notes and conducted an in-depth analysis of how my hegemonically shaped perspective, values, and mindset have influenced the information recorded in the field notes. I continually tried to limit such individual values to avoid discursive discussion and interpretation of field reality.

Sociality

In narrative inquiry, it is important to collect individuals' feelings, hopes, beliefs, and aspirations, along with the contexts in which they are embedded. Sociality refers to personal and social contexts that include personal feelings and existential environment (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

In my study, I have carefully included my research participants' feelings, concerns, and emotions. I have attempted to include how they think about their journey to higher education and how existential social norms and values have shaped it. Besides, I spent a significant amount of time conducting field observations, building relationships with research participants, reflecting on my possible biases in information collection, analysis, and interpretation, and triangulating information through interviews, field observations, and so forth.

Spatiality

Spatiality refers to the place, particularly a physical environment, where experience unfolds over time (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Places have a significant influence on the individual’s experience. Hence, I have accounted for the place of my research participants’ birth and upbringing, as well as their school education and higher education. I have examined the birthplaces of my research participants, which were remote areas, and found that school education was available in their settlements. As schools accommodate local students and teachers, *Gandharva* and other children mostly face some forms of caste-based discrimination. Likewise, they face caste-based exclusion and discrimination in social events and public places, which has an indirect effect on their school education. In contrast, as *Gandharva* transitioned to higher education, they did not experience direct caste-based exclusion or discrimination.

To explain these contexts, I have included a brief description of the places where my research participants belong and how they develop their resilience to pursue higher education. Furthermore, I prepared notes detailing the locations where community observation was conducted and where personal interviews were conducted.

Ethical Consideration

Creswell (2014) emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations in research and explains that researchers should build trust with research participants and protect them from potential harm and misconduct that may result from the research. Therefore, I will identify the possible ethical issues related to the research participants and implement measures to protect them. There are certain ethical standards before the research study; at the beginning of the study; during data collection, transcription, and analysis; and during report writing, sharing, and protecting information (Creswell, 2014, p. 132). Before conducting the research, I will obtain consent from the research committee of Kathmandu University and the *Gandharva* Culture and Art Organization. Furthermore, I will take verbal and written consent from the research participants and ensure their information is confidential. Likewise, I will take into account local culture and values when conducting in-depth interviews with the research participants.

In this research, I reflected on my positionality (Palmer & Caldas, 2017) at every stage of the research to avoid influencing the research participants and the research process. Furthermore, I avoided unethical practices such as using research for personal gain, detaching from the culture and participants I am involved with, and subjugating community practices (Conquergood, 1985). As Conqurgood (1985) further asserts, I valued and provided balanced space for the dialogical performance of each research participant. As Thomas (1993) explains, I have not disguised data collected in the field that do not directly contribute to my research agenda.

As suggested by Madison (2005), I introduced myself to the research participants and briefly outline my objective and the actions I follow during the research process. I explained how to use the results from the research. I communicated clearly how my research participants are selected and the possible benefits/risks to them. I ensured the confidentiality of research participants and obtained informed consent to conduct interviews, clarifying the time required for the same.

To avoid the researcher's biases in the questionnaire, I conducted a peer interview to identify gaps. Based on my peers' feedback during the dry run, I modified the research tools and prepared for field data collection.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I included narrative inquiry as my research methodology to explain Gandharva's struggles in pursing higher education. I used critical paradigm of narrative inquiry to explore different contexts such as economic, social, cultural, political and historical contexts contributing to the marginalization of *Gandharva* in higher education. I critically analysed the power relations between *Gandhrarva* and others for their limited representation in higher education. To explain Gandharva's struggles, I purposefully chose four Gandharva and narrated their stories. To gather information, I did community observation, made conversation with the community members and the selected Gandharva and their parents which were translated, transcribed and thematized as per the requirement of my study. While narrating stories of the research participants, I took an account of their temporality, sociality and spatiality. Building on the stories of Gandharva, I explored how multiple contexts create barrier for them to acquire formal education, from school to higher education.

CHAPTER IV
ENTRY WITH NARRATIVE

I present stories of four *Gandharva* in this chapter and seek to narrate their experiences of formal education, both school and higher education, and obstacles they face and support mechanisms they get in formal education. I also explain how systemic inequalities lead *Gandharva* to be excluded from higher education opportunities and, subsequently, from the opportunity to live a prosperous life. I interviewed them, recorded their responses, transcribed them, made meaning of the narratives, and checked with research participants to ensure the quality of my research. Based on interviews and transcriptions, I followed up with my research participants and refined their stories. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of my research participants, I have created pseudonyms and pseudo-addresses for them.

Entry with Mr. Leader's Story

I was reflecting on the questions I will discuss with Mr. Leader as I made my way to meet him. I again reflected that set questions may lead our conversation; hence, I thought to have a discussion that naturally focuses on his educational journey and the discrimination and exclusion he faced along the way. Finally, I decided to discuss different themes such as his societal contexts, school education, higher education, and caste-based discrimination. I was greeted by Mr. Leader in his restaurant. We sat on a wooden chair and started a discussion.

Mr. Leader's Story

It was around 5:00 PM on 11th June 2023 when I met Mr. Leader at a restaurant in Thamel where he was working as a manager. He came smiling after completing his musical shows at Kathmandu Guest House in Thamel. We both sat on a chair and started a discussion with casual hi-hello. Our discussion began with reflections on the current political landscape.

Mr. Leader is involved in Nepali Congress's movement and in music (plays *Sarangee*, Madal) and performs at various forums. He manages to continue a political movement, manage a community restaurant, perform music, pursue a master's degree, and support his livelihoods. While he was continuing his higher education in Saraswati Multiple Campus in Kathmandu, Mr. Leader connected with a student union of Nepali Congress (NC) which enabled his access to key NC political leaders.

Consequently, Mr. Leader has considerable recognition in a party's politics. Besides, Mr. Leader secures his livelihood through various means which have made him independent.

During his early school years, Mr. Leader did not immediately recognize caste-based discrimination. Mr. Leader, together with other *Gandharva* students, performed well at the school, which helped maintain mutual respect among students. As the class consisted of a mixed community, including students from *Gandharva, Kumal, Bishwokarma, Chhetri,* and so forth, Mr. Leader did not notice any overt discrimination in the classrooms by his fellow students. Mr. Leader began to recognize caste-based exclusion as he moved into the upper classes and became more aware of the caste-based hierarchy embedded in Nepal's social norms and values. Within a school environment, Mr. Leader sensed caste-based discrimination, particularly in cultural and religious spaces. Mr. Leader illustrates how he was discriminated against when goddess Saraswati's offerings were distributed separately to *Dalit* students. His experience of caste-based exclusion. He shares his experience on how schools as government institutions sustained and transmitted caste-based exclusion as,

> *I remember the day when there was a Saraswati Puja at school; the offerings were distributed to us (Gandharva) and other Dalit communities separately. Likewise, when the school (Satyawati Basic School) established a temple inside the school premises, there was a clear banner marking 'Dalit students were requested not to enter the temple'. There was a dispute and conflict, and later on, the banner was removed.*

In Mr. Leader's journey to higher education, caste-based exclusion was less visible and direct than in school education; however, it persisted in subtle forms. Mr. Leader experienced social distancing, avoidance in informal academic or social networks, and discriminatory remarks from peers, though they were not frequent. The practices had a significant impact on his psychology, led him to self-evaluate his caste identity, and increased his sense of humility.

. As soon as he entered higher education, he came into contact with the Student Union, which provided him with many opportunities for exposure. The union and political party consistently pushed for him to be given the opportunity, considering him a representative of the *Dalit* and minority communities. However, Mr. Leader notes that his representation and opportunities remained symbolic, and

that there was limited access to decision-making positions for *Gandharva* and other disadvantaged communities.

Mr. Leader doesn't see opportunities in Nepal after completing higher education. He shares that, due to a lack of opportunities, many *Gandharva*, as well as other youths, undertake labour/study/permanent migration to foreign countries during their Bachelor-level studies. Besides, almost all adult *Gandharva* have more than dual responsibilities- looking after family and continuing their study, earning money, and so forth. Hence, they tend to engage in earning and learning, which has a direct impact on their higher study. Despite these multiple responsibilities, Mr. Leader had an aspiration that 'Education is essential for change' which always encouraged him to continue his studies.

Mr. Leader sees a lack of a detailed study, survey, or research on the access of *Gandharva* and other marginalized and disadvantaged communities to higher education. Hence, the country has very limited information on the status and barriers to education of *Gandharva,* despite the constitutional provision for free school education and scholarships for higher education for *Dalit* students. Mr. Leader brings a current instance of a *Dalit* committing suicide due to the inability to pay school fees for the SEE exam-2023 and argues the government's limitation in executing the education policies to foster equitable education for all.

Mr. Leader also sees the generational impact of the education system among the *Gandharva* community. He shares that the previous *Gandharva* generation did not have higher education (the majority of them did not have a school education either); hence, their children or themselves felt that studying up to SLC and IA (10+2) was enough. But as the present generation has begun to pursue higher education and secure good jobs with high incomes, children are now realizing the importance of higher education, and the trend toward higher education has been increasing.

Despite some cases of avoidance, there is no caste-based discrimination/ negligence in school or on campuses. In a few cases related to exclusion, both at the school and campus levels, they took it as normal. Hence, the rooted exclusion has been internalized as a 'habitus,' and people feel it as normal. Besides, there is an inclusion agenda in the political parties, and hence a representative from the *Gandharva*/minority community has some opportunities inside political parties; however, it cannot be seen that while the party is represented in decision-making positions and higher positions that get benefits, the *Gandharva*/minority hardly get

them. Hence, the inclusion approach has been more complicated in the present context. Moreover, higher education in Nepal has not been able to produce the skilled human resources required in our labour market. The *Gandharva* community believes that higher education cannot guarantee a better life in Nepal and, as a result, is not interested in enrolling in and/or completing higher education, despite increased awareness of the importance of Education.

Mr. Therapist

It was 5:00 PM and almost dark when I met Mr. Therapist on February 10, 2024. Our meeting was held at Kathmandu Guest House in Thamel, Kathmandu. After he finished his musical shows at the Kathmandu Guest House, he offered a cup of coffee to both of us, and we started chatting about the status of our professions, since we had known each other since childhood.

Mr. Therapist completed his school education in Gorkha and migrated to Kathmandu for his higher studies. Seeing an opportunity to earn and continue his studies, as his neighbour's elders did, he moved to Kathmandu with his parents. Since 2000 AD, Mr. Therapist started playing *Sarangee* on the streets of Thamel, Kathmandu, during the day and continued his studies in the morning.

Mr. Therapist is busy every day, as he is involved in music therapy for children with autism at a couple of locations, runs the *Sarangee* business, and volunteers to perform music at a hotel. This is his usual routine every day. After doing a Post Graduate Diploma in music therapy from India, he secured a job as a music therapist in 2013. Currently, Mr. Musician works in Autism Care Nepal, Jharuwarasi, Lalitpur; Navajyoti Center, Baluwatar; Hope Center, Baluwatar; Neo Bishes Vidyalaya, Baluwatar; Friends of Parents of Children with Autism, Swayambhu; Avani Foundation, Hadigaun; Disable New Life Center, Thali, Kathmandu; Kripa Counseling, Imadol, and so forth.

He carries out multiple duties for his and his family's livelihood. *Sarangee* and music are his passion, interest, culture, and livelihood, which have been strengthened through his postgraduate diploma in music therapy from India.

Mr. Therapist completed early grades (from ECD-grade 3) at Bal Mandir school, Gorkha, a community school. His parents enrolled him in a community/government school because there was no financial burden. Besides free education, the school provided him with a uniform and a midday meal. He did not have a school bag and walked barefoot to school, particularly because of his low

economic status. Afterwards, He completed a school-leaving certificate from Shakti Secondary School, Gorkha. He shares his story about how they manage school uniforms as, "*During the Dashain festival, my parents used to buy school uniforms simply because the new school uniform fulfills a dual purpose- new clothes for the festival and a uniform for school".*

Mr. Therapist faced fewer caste-based exclusions in school education. Neither teachers nor peers discriminated against students based on caste. During his childhood, he witnessed a couple of incidents of caste-based discrimination in society, as he shares his experience as,

> *We used to go to other higher-caste households and watch television. I, along with other friends from the Gandharva community, was restricted from watching television or sitting outside their TV/sitting room. Likewise, when my parents went to have a cup of tea at nearby teashops, they used to wash the tea glasses by themselves. I also followed the same trend.*

Mr. Therapist reflects that the school curriculum and textbooks do not reflect the *Gandharva* culture or societal contexts. He witnessed some textbook chapters using discriminatory illustrations, such as Brahmin as Prime Minister, *Dalit* (Damai) as a sewer, and involving menial jobs. This led to the development of the concept that *Dalit* and lower castes are involved in menial jobs. Talking about *Gandharva*, illustrations only depict *Gandharva* as a caste that plays *Sarangee*, sings traditional songs, and falls under the lower caste category, rather than highlighting *Sarangee* as a skillful and esteemed skill.

Mr. Therapist's parents were in traditional jobs, used to go from village to village and from person to person in Kathmandu, and played *Sarangee* and sang songs, receiving some money and food grains in return. As his parents were in Kathmandu, Mr. Therapist also moved there for his after-school education. His parents enrolled him at Saraswoti Multiple Campus in Lainchaur, Kathmandu. To bear the opportunity costs of certificate-level education, as many *Gandharva* did, Mr. Therapist also began playing and selling *Sarangee* in Thamel, Kathmandu, and began making some money, which supported his intermediate in commerce education. The job required him to travel outside the Kathmandu Valley frequently, which led him to miss many classes on campus. There were also psychological factors associated with involvement in jobs and continuing campus education. Mr. Therapist did not have enough money to bear the costs associated with campus education, which created fear

inside him if he could not pass the examination. To make up for the missed classes, he took tuition classes, which also added to the cost burden. Mr. Therapist faced an economic burden on one hand, and on the other hand, due to missing classes, he had a fear of failing the examination too. This led to psychological distress, too. Mr. Therapist shares, *"As I spent more time earning and less time studying, my academic results were not good".*

Mr. Therapist did not face caste-based discrimination/exclusion on campus. However, he faced such discrimination in the rented home in Kathmandu. It took almost 5/6 years for Mr. Therapist to complete the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS). While pursuing his BBS, Mr. Therapist started his own cassette-selling business. He also migrated to Dubai for labour and income generation. Afterwards, Mr. Therapist pursued a postgraduate diploma in music therapy in India with a full scholarship, during which he expanded his cultural skills and knowledge in the course. After a 2-year course in music therapy, he became a professional musical therapist, and Mr. Therapist now has a regular job in a couple of autism care centers. Mr. Therapist enjoyed the music therapy course as he was able to use his inherent *Sarangee* skills and knowledge to treat the people. He completed the course within the stipulated timeline, and he had the opportunity to develop his skills based on his existing knowledge and skills.

Mr. Therapist sees there is no relevance of school and higher education to the *Gandharva* culture. Likewise, he reflects that the prevalence of early marriage among the *Gandharva* community is one of the key reasons hindering them from pursuing higher education. Mr. Therapist shares that *Gandharva's* parents understand the importance of education and intend to support their children's education; however, due to their poor financial resources, they expect their children to engage in income-generating activities as soon as they complete SLC/intermediate education. This poses a challenge for *Gandharva* to enter higher education and pass. He further illustrates that *the Gandharva* are unaware of the government's various scholarship schemes and cannot benefit from them.

Caste-based discrimination and exclusion have been deeply rooted in the Nepalese community, and the community members perceive it as a societal norm or culture and accept it without any questions. *Gandharva* people are groomed with the feeling that they shouldn't enter the house/kitchen of the higher caste people, and they belong to the lowest category of society. In the community, *Gandharva* children are

groomed hearing what *Gandharva can* do even if they are educated. This discouraged them from going to school and university. For the *Gandharva* people, due to low economic status, their first choice of education is the nearest government school. Scholarships, free uniforms, midday meals, etc., enable them to continue their school education.

Even if the caste-based discrimination/exclusion does not appear to be clearly seen in educational institutions, the existence of social exclusion in the community has a significant impact on *Gandharva*'s education in school and higher education. Furthermore, neither the *Gandharva* children nor their parents understand the importance of higher education. They see education solely as a means of increasing income. On the other hand, there are higher education policies, scholarships, and promotion schemes, but *Gandharva* people are not aware of these schemes because they don't participate in decision-making, nor do the policies translate and communicate at the local level. We can see the viscosity of poverty, social exclusion, and lower education status in the *Gandharva* community, which has been exacerbated by the existing social, cultural, and government system.

Mr. Development Expert

I met Mr. Development Expert on the 12th of February at 1:00 PM. He is an employee of an international NGO and has been working in the development sector for over two decades. He contributes to educational advancement at national and international levels.

Mr. Development Export, who was born in a remote village of Lamjung district, took a thorny path to higher education and completed it successfully. He is now a PhD scholar and continuing his studies at Tribhuwan University. With a cup of coffee, we started our conversation, focusing on his experiences in formal schooling and higher education, particularly the hindrances and support mechanisms he encountered. Mr. Development Expert was one of the top performing students at the school and was known for his academic excellence in the community and at the school. Despite his academic excellence, Mr. Development Expert witnessed frequent events of caste-based discrimination. He shares his first discriminatory experience in schools as,

> *In school, probably in grade five, because we were from the Dalit community, we were not allowed to cook during school's forest picnic event as part of our Pre-vocational Education subject. Instead, we were assigned to collect*

> *firewood and clean utensils. This is the first time I realized caste-based discrimination. We revolted against their behaviours. We ran away from the picnic spot to avoid having to clean the utensils. Those who ran away from the event were punished physically by the teacher the next day.*
>
> *While reflecting on the event now, those who ran away from the picnic spot and were punished were from the Dalit Community (Damai, Kami, Sarki Gaine, etc.). I also realize now that how school and teachers as an agency structurally discriminate against Dalit students, as school-imposed exclusion and discouraged education. Hence, this discouraged me from studying that subject and led me to develop a negative perception of the education system.*

Mr. Development Expert reflects back on such an incident now and realizes how structural agencies have been developed to sustain caste-based discrimination and social exclusion. The community sustained extreme caste-based discrimination and social exclusion, too. *Dalit* students like Mr. Development Expert were not allowed to take food together with so-called upper caste people. Likewise, there were separate sources of drinking water for *Dalit* and non-*Dalit*. There was very limited access to the forest for *Dalit*, while non-*Dalit* like *Panta* had separate taps for water and were privileged in other services as well.

Mr. Development Expert states that his parents' and family's support were key to his successful school education. Although his parents struggled hard to make a living, they supported his education as much as they could. As he was one of the good students in his community and school, community members encouraged him, saying, "He studies well and will do well in the future." Despite discrimination and exclusion in some forms at school, as a good student, teachers also encouraged him to study.

Social exclusion is at an optimum level in the community. *Dalit* were not allowed to eat together with others. Mr. Development Expert illustrates the level of discrimination in the community as,

> *Even in my marriage, there was a separate kitchen for Dalit and non-Dalit. There was a separate well (Kuwa) for the Gandharva and Panta (so-called higher caste) communities. Pant and Kandel (so-called) higher castes have easy access to and control over forests, whereas we (the Gandharva community) had to steal firewood because we lacked access to those resources. People who were discriminated against showed their revolt against such behaviour by setting the logs and forests on fire. I witnessed*

> *untouchability in a public tap when I was a child. I went to the public tab and shifted others' water pots. The other accused said that Gandharva (as a member of the Dalit community) touched their water pot and made the water pot impure. I threw the pot to reverse the situation. Hence, social discrimination was everywhere and was at an optimum level.*

Gandharva (together with other children from the *Dalit community*) was not allowed to touch a water pot inside the classroom. Likewise, *Gandharva* and other *Dalit* children were bullied if they were not able to answer the questions of teachers. Mr. Development Expert shares his experience as,

> *I was one of the talented students and did not face such bullying, but others from my (Gandharva) community were bullied frequently. Hence, we used to feel that education was not that important, and that the school itself was a place of discrimination. Hence, the environment as such as very discouraging for education.*

Mr. Development Expert pursued his education, as his parents never pressured him to leave school and pursue another profession. Mr. Development Expert further shares that, "*My parents had many challenges, even hand-to-mouth. However, they never pressured me to earn immediately by selling Sarangee on public buses, as others of Gandharva' age used to do"S.*

In schools, teachers motivated students who perform better in schools; however, using derogatory words, such as "*Ta*" (Derogatory word) for *Dalit*, including *Gandharva,* was common. Mr. Development Expert shared his experience in the school as,

> *Whenever I did well in school, there was a saying like, even if he is the son of Gaine, he has done better. The statement was good at the time, but when I reflect on it now, I consider it discriminatory. Likewise, there were statements like What will the Gaine's son do after reading? which were really discouraging for the continuation of formal education.*

Mr. Development Expert further illustrates how schools reinforce caste-based discrimination and discourage Gandhavas from pursuing their education effectively.

> *I used to be class-first and school-first, mostly. It was tradition for the better-performing students to be taken to the Budhanilkantha school in Kathmandu to study for the test. Budhanilkantha School was regarded as one of the best schools at that time. However, despite being a better-performing student, the*

> *school did not take me for the Budhanilkantha school test, whereas the Panta community students who ranked below me were taken. Hence, that was not a motivating factor to study.*

Gandharva has no formal education or exposure to reading. They have exposure to arts and culture; however, others have exposure to reading. For example, Brahman (non-*Dalit* caste) has a culture of reading/citing the Swastani (Hindu religious book), Patro (Calendar), and so forth. These exposures have a direct connection to current formal education.

Mr. Development Expert further opines that *Gandharva*'s culture is stigmatized. There is a culture of *Sida/Sewa* collection (Collecting food/grains from upper caste people). However, it was regarded as a derogatory and menial job, and *Gandharva* hesitated to share their work with their classmates. Encountering classmates during Sida collection time, *Gandharva* feels humiliated, leading them to drop out of school. Caste-based discriminatory practices in schools lead to missing some school days for *Dalit*, due to caste- related trauma. Hence, due to humiliation and other exclusionary practices, collectively discouraged *Gandharva* and other children from *Dalit* communities from continuing their education.

Mr. Development Expert also shares the limitations of Nepal's education system for adopting a differentiated learning approach for students with different learning needs. He shares,

> *I was one of the good students and others also motivated me for education. Reflecting on the situation, I think the learning process is different for different people; hence, I got good marks, whereas my peers from my caste did not. Moreover, Nepal's education system did not identify children's diverse learning needs, styles, and processes and adopted a blanket approach, which enabled some to get good marks while others did not.*

Mr. Development Expert adds that *Gandharva* children's psychology has been traumatized in every aspect- in classroom teaching, social festivals, community spaces like temples, taps, and so forth. An important question arises there*:* how can such traumatized children regularize their study and acquire learning in a structured way?

Gandharva has a culture of arts and music which is joyful, lively, and engaging. These fosters bonding and harmony, which leads to learning music quickly. Therefore, these conditions are prerequisites for learning; in contrast, in education, *Gandharva* has a traumatic condition because of exclusion by teachers (torturing

students) and societies, which is a big barrier for *Gandharva* to attend school and higher education.

Mr. Development Expert shares that the challenges he faced, including caste-based discrimination in schools and communities, strengthened his resilience and supported his education to higher levels. Mr. Development Expert shares, *"Gandharva who went through different discriminatory and demotivated contexts, including social exclusion and economic hardship in schools, had weak confidence. At the same time, they become resilient too as they struggled with many problems and reached this stage".*

Mr. Development Expert, after graduating from the school, started his further education in Kathmandu. He joined Mr. Therapist at Science Campus, Lainchaur. To cover his daily costs and the opportunity cost of education, he started selling *Sarangee* in Thamel. Mr. Development Expert met one of his classmates while playing and selling *Sarangee* in Thamel. With a sense of humiliation, he migrated to Pokhara and joined Prithvi Narayan Campus in the Science (Biology) and Education faculties. He travelled to Kathmandu to earn money and returned to Pokhara to continue his studies. He struggled to continue his studies for two key reasons: he was from a government school, and he struggled with English, which was the language of most subjects in the science faculty. The other one was that he missed many regular classes, due to his engagement in earning. Hence, he left the Science faculty after 5-7 months and continued at the Education faculty.

Mr. Development Expert shares that it was easy for him to complete higher education, as he decided to pursue the "Education Faculty," where he was able to fund his education. He reflects that if he had continued "science" education, he would not have been able to complete his studies. Therefore, even a *Gandharva* pursues higher education, they do in least preferred subjects like humanities and education as they had to face multiple difficulties ranging from social exclusion to caste-based discrimination in societies and workplaces to economic difficulties. Mr. Development Expert shares,

> *I still feel that if I had not faced such multiple difficulties on my journey to higher education, I could have secured a good number of offers. Now, I am doing an MPhil (Education Studies) leading to a PhD at Tribhuwan University. I was a part-time student and a full-time job holder while pursuing an Intermediate and a bachelor's degree.*

Hence, due to economic hardship, and the social perspective of the *Gandharva* culture, Mr. Development Expert was not able to continue his science studies. Mr. Development Expert shares, "*My aim to be a doctor was crushed by the imposed structure of caste-base discrimination and social exclusion in Nepal. We were people without any dreamS".*

Mr. Development Expert reflects the way society stigmatized his culture (*Gandharva* culture). For example, the Brahmin (so-called upper caste) plays/takes Sankha without hesitation, and they worship in a temple with pride and prestige. However, *Gandharva* hesitates to show/play *Sarangee* and sell their arts.

The Gandharva community supported their children's higher education. They had an aspiration that at least one *Gandharva* should be a doctor. However, the reality was different. There was an economic burden and a lack of exposure to what to do and how to proceed with a higher education course.

Mr. Development Expert also shares the existence of social disrespect and workplace discrimination based on caste. It's common to address *Dalit* people with derogatory words like "ta", whereas non-*Dalit* get respectable words like 'tapai', 'hajur'. Mr. Development Expert shares a story that exemplifies how *Dalit* have been treated, regardless of their occupation.

> *I worked at Kathmandu Valley College as department head, where our neighbour worked as a school guard at the same college. We travelled to our village together, where we met one of the villagers (non-Dalit) who was younger than us. He called the school guard (with respect) as Namaste Dai, how are you? with a respectful word 'Tapai', whereas he directly called me 'Ta ahile ka Chhas'? Hence, there was no social respect at all. Everything in society and around us was not supportive.*

The existence of caste-based discrimination is significant in the workplace. Workplaces, as part of the communal structure, preserve traditions and pass them down through generations. Mr. Development Expert shares his story about caste-based ostracism in the workplace, as

> *I was the principal of a boarding school. During the recruitment, the school did not know my caste. When school management asked my caste, I identified myself as 'Gandharva'. They further asked: in which category does Gandharva belong according to the Hindu Manusmriti's four castes? I replied to them that Gandharva falls under 'Sudra'. One of the persons from the*

school management said, personally I don't follow casteism; however, there is a widespread rumour like none will send their children to school where Dalit is a principal. He asked me to change my surname as 'Sharma' (a caste from so-called higher caste). I had a tough talk with the person. I said that what great work has your caste did to us, and what sinful activities that our caste has done for you? I did not work there and registered a case for this issue. Hence, even though we are educated, there is much discrimination in the workplace. Many Dalit have changed their surname to avoid these forms of discrimination.

Mr. Development Expert believes the current education system has perpetuated educational inequality. The postmodern perspective on education emphasizes the importance of the arts, culture, and wisdom, which are not currently acknowledged in Nepal's education system. Nepal's formal education system has reproduced so-called educated people, which has reproduced exclusion in two forms- visible and invisible. The government and high-ranking officials have a responsibility to ensure equity and inclusion in educational institutions and societies; however, due to their limited understanding of equity in education, they fail to create an environment that ensures quality education for all, irrespective of students' various identities.

Mr. Development Expert explains the essence of educational justice in a university. From the right perspective, the university is equally responsible for reaching the community that has no representation in higher education; however, Nepal's education system reports that *the Gandharva* community has not been able to acquire higher education. Hence, universities themselves have violated the education rights of citizens, particularly those who belong to marginalized and *Dalit* communities like *Gandharva*. Mr. Development Expert shares that education should be viewed from a justice perspective. In our present context, the system sees faults in people and finds them guilty of not being able to access higher education, which is a reversal of justice.

There is a philosophical dilemma about understanding equity in education. The current system evaluates an individual's capacity, including their level of awareness, to pursue higher education in Nepal and holds them responsible for their inability to do so. In contrast, the system should recognize the diversity of individuals

and communities and develop a framework that fosters inclusion, equity, and opportunities for all to thrive within the education system.

Likewise, a university is a hub for identifying social problems and advocating for their change through research and studies. However, university education and research have a much greater focus on methodological processes. *Dalit* has very few representations in university and higher education institutions; hence, the issue of equity in education has been remained undiscussed in university education.

The current education system in Nepal is in a dilemma. The education system negates culture, wisdom, and art; it defines and promotes literacy as the ultimate objective of education. In this context, education produces literate people, also known as educated people. However, indigenous knowledge, culture, and arts have been largely missing in the current education system. Hence, the education dilemma is a key barrier to *Gandharva* pursuing higher education.

Mr. Musician

I called Mr. Musician on 7th March 2024 at around 2:00 PM to get his time for the discussion. I also shared the purpose of our meeting: to collect stories about his journey to higher education. We agreed to meet a week later. Mr. Musician asked me to meet him at the Northfield Cafe in Thamel. He greeted me at the cafe on the 14th of March 2024 at 6:00 PM, where I observed his musical performance alongside other *Gandharva*, which was one of Mr. Musicain's volunteer projects aimed at earning some money. The music group placed CDs and traditional Nepali folk instruments for the selling purpose. They could earn if the materials were sold out.

After his musical show, we had a cup of tea and started a conversation about his experience with school and university education. Mr. Musician performed well and secured a good position until the end of secondary education (Grade 10). Mr. Musician, with the support of his dad and mom, had a supportive environment at home that helped accelerate his studies. For example, his father invested the money he earned from a musical performance in Japan in electricity so that Mr. Musician could read at night. Mr. Musician’s parents fulfilled every prerequisite for education, including educational materials such as a copy, a pen, a bag, and so forth.

He shares that, unlike him, in the majority of other households in *the Gandharva* community, children did not have such a supportive home environment for education, as parents were bound to leave their children behind in Kathmandu to earn, sometimes for a week or more. Mr. Musician shares,

> *I remember, Sujan and I were living in the same community as neighbours. He was very good at studying, and he was from the Gandharva community too. I always had competition with him to get better results in education at school. Gradually, his study degraded as his parents used to leave him alone at home and sometimes took him with them to Kathmandu. I had constant parental support in my education. My father spent the majority of his time in Kathmandu, leaving us at home. However, my mother consistently supported my education.*

On many occasions, Mr. Musician faced caste-based discrimination/exclusion in a school. He possessed a fear of belonging to the *Gandharva* community in school, as his classmates and teacher did not miss an opportunity to insult him based on caste. His non-*Dalit* classmates and teachers knew about *Gandharva* and their traditional occupation (*Sarangee* playing) and used caste-based derogatory words often. Mr. Musician remembers the event when teachers criticized him for not pronouncing letters and texts correctly. He shares, "*I still remember, I pronounced 'Maalai' instead of 'Malai', and teachers had a derogatory response like see they spoke Gaine (derogatory words for Gandharva) language".*

The schoolteachers continued to make these derogatory remarks throughout his school years, and such practices persisted until his sister's educational journey in the school. Hence, these practices humiliated Mr. Musician, which negatively affected his studies.

Mr. Musician and other *Dalit* children had a fear of touching the water pots of others, as they were accused of being from the untouchable caste in school. Mr. Musician and other *Dalit* classmates bear caste-based discrimination inside the classroom by teachers. Mr. Musician shares his experience of the way teachers promote caste-based ostracism in the teaching process, and the way he protested against such malpractices in grade nine, as

> *I was a student of Economics. Our economics teacher (from the Brahmin, so-called higher caste) cites time and again an example relating to the Gandharva community. He said, "When Gaine (a derogatory word for Gandharva) came asking for alms, my mother would give paddy instead of rice. The cost is higher for higher than that of paddy. Paddy needs to be dried and milled, which adds to the expenses. That's why, when Gaine came asking for alms, our mother would give them paddy instead of rice. The illustration*

which he cited three-fourths of 3/4 time really touched me; hence, I decided to discuss this with the teacher. One day, after leaving the school assembly, I waited for the teacher on my way home. Even though I feared punishment for missing the assembly, I met the teacher alone and asked why he had cited an example from my community in class. I also shared that the example really hurt me. The teacher apologized for his illustration on caste and committed not to repeat it.

Mr. Musician also witnessed the severity of caste-based discrimination while he saw a banner with a print "those who are lower caste should not touch here" at the front of the Saraswati temple, which was built inside a local school. Mr. Musician was studying in grade nine when this incident happened. Realizing the discrimination based on caste, he called the Ward Chairperson. Although people agreed that public spaces like schools should not foster caste-based discrimination, they manifested that discrimination and exclusion based on caste can be somehow justified in private property. The people said, "It would have been a different matter if it were private property, but schools like public properties should not practice caste-based discrimination".

Mr. Musician explains how schoolteachers who represent the dominant caste group fostered caste-based exclusionary and discriminatory remarks relating to their appearance and cleanliness. The teachers commented to students when they came to school with poor hygiene. They commented like, "How dirty you are? You are filthiness like Gaine." Moreover, they remark on a beautiful *Gandharva* girl: "You do not look like Gaine. You are more like Bahuni." This institutionalized the concept that *Gandharva* girls are not beautiful and *Gandharva* do not maintain proper hygiene, instead Brahmin (so-called high caste) do.

Hence, the use of derogatory words by teachers and fellow students, illustration of caste-based derogatory examples, caste-based exclusion inside schools, primarily in religion and cultural-related aspects, caste-based negative comparisons and cleanliness left a deep impression on Mr. Musician's psychology. His self-esteem, which was already deteriorated by social and cultural caste-based hierarchy, has been further deteriorated by such incidents. These had a collective impact on his ownership and belongingness to the school and the education system in Nepal.

Therefore, Mr. Musician and other *Dalit* children started to stand against the caste-based discrimination in school and increased their resiliency towards societal comments on casteism.

Mr. Musician further shares that although the Economics teacher apologized for his illustrations related to casteism, he did not feel comfortable continuing to study economics with the same teacher. He left the economics class and joined the Optional Math class instead. He took a tuition class for the optional math to cover the missed lessons. Mr. Musician was one of the better performing students from the *Gandharva* community and secured a first division in the SLC.

Caste-based discrimination was widespread in the community. Community members made derogatory comments about what Gaine feeds their children as they seek good results. From Grade 3 onwards, the performance of *Gandharva* children started to degrade for several reasons, such as they experienced frequent conflict in their families, excessive alcohol use in the family, missing school classes as family members often take their children with them to earn a living, economic challenges, and so forth. However, the school's scholarship scheme for students from marginalized communities was an encouraging factor in their studies.

Dalit children accepted their belonging to a lower caste without any question, as they perceived it as a social norm. A lack of parental understanding of the importance of children's education led many *Gandharva* children to drop out of school.

As the *Gandharva* children reach 7/8 years, they start to understand the community context more deeply. As social members, they begin to adapt to social norms, values, and traditions that foster casteism. They gradually develop the understanding that they should not study higher and that they need to earn for themselves and their family as early as possible. Hence, once the *Gandharva* children reach the age of understanding community perceptions of their caste belonging, they gradually decline in their learning performance.

Mr. Musician's journey after SLC was no less challenging either. He started his SLC journey in Kathmandu because his father had a rented room there. He joined Ratna Rajya Campus in the Arts faculty. He also joined a band with his father, which helped him cover the costs of my college and university. Although he did not face caste-related challenges in Kathmandu, he always had difficulty juggling multiple tasks, from studying to earning.

As in school, Mr. Musician received adequate support from his parents, which enabled him to pursue higher education in Kathmandu. Mr. Musician joined a master's program immediately after completing a bachelor's degree. Due to a massive earthquake in 2015, Mr. Musician's journey to the Masters was stopped. He got married, and his father suffered from Neuro-related health problems. These circumstances increased his responsibility towards his family. He was traumatized due to his father's health status and other multiple responsibilities. Mr. Musician also went through medication for anti-depression.

Mr. Musician sees *Sarangee* as a matter of pride, as *Sarangee* has been a key to his success. Mr. Musician enjoys performing musical shows through *Sarangee* playing and it provides him a sense of satisfaction. Mr. Musician proudly shares that *Sarangee* and music helped him to fulfil his economic needs for his higher education, too. Mr. Musician also realizes that formal education helped him improve his musical skills and present them more precisely and differently. Hence, his *Sarangee* and formal education degrees complement one another. Mr. Musician says,

"Wherever I am and whatever I am, it's all because of Sarangee".

Mr. Musician further shares that higher education increased his confidence to present his *Sarangee* skills in different forums. It was a proud moment to introduce himself as a Graduate while playing *Sarangee* in different events and avenues. Because of his higher education, Mr. Musician received a fellowship in Korea, where he had the opportunity to gain exposure and advance his musical skills. However, whenever Mr. Musician introduces him as a *Sarangee* musician, people tend to make stereotypical gestures about *Gandharva* and their musical instruments, which demonstrate ingrained caste-based discrimination towards *Gandharva*.

Mr. Musician reflects that the environment presented to *Gandharva* children at homes, communities, and schools has a significant impact on children's education. Likewise, he thinks parents' perceptions of children's education have a significant influence on children's education. The majority of *Gandharva's* parents have a limited understanding of the potential of formal education to improve their children's futures. If parents don't value children's education, the same feeling passes to children, and they don't prioritize education. Furthermore, *Gandharva*, like other communities, has education preferences for male children over female. Females in the *Gandharva* community do not have the opportunity or exposure to pursue higher education, either. Mr. Musician shares,

My two sisters completed 10+2 but did not continue their higher education. As a son, I had the privilege of sharing a rented room with my father in Kathmandu, but my sisters did not.

Mr. Musician opines that the current formal education system in Nepal has a loophole that prevents marginalized communities from accessing higher education. Due to multiple contexts such as limited awareness about the availability of scholarships, widespread caste-based discrimination in school education, and financial burden, the marginalized community is led to early drop-out from formal education.

Mr. Musician further contends that the inclusion of *Gandharva Sarangee* and arts in the higher education curriculum makes it easier for *Gandharva* to complete higher education.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with entering the stories and experiences of four Gandharva which covers their struggles for formal education in schools and higher education. I included detailed stories of my research participants in this chapter including their struggles, aspirations, hopes, feelings, and dissatisfaction towards the current education system. Their stories reveal that schools continue to showcase visible and direct forms of discrimination and exclusion based on caste hierarchy, whereas higher education institutions fail to recognize systemic and structural exclusion and address them from the perspective of education justice. Likewise, the stories of four *Gandharva* also exemplify their strong resilience towards these adversities, making their way to higher education.

CHAPTER V
MAKING MEANING OF NARRATIVES

In this chapter, based on the narratives of four *Gandharva* presented in Chapter IV, I synthesized information and derived meaning. Humans express their life experiences through stories, whereas narrative researchers describe, collect, and retell those stories, narrating them in the form of literature to have wider social implications (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). They further emphasize that narrative researchers, based on individual experience, construct narratives and stories, identify patterns in those narratives, and construct meaning from their experiences. Therefore, narrative inquiry posits individual experience within the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts, and uncovers the way personal experience interlinks with the complex systemic structures. Hence, in this research study, I situated personal experience in the broader social, cultural, and systemic contexts, and sought to unfold complex relationships between personal experience and the larger systemic structure, for meaning-making and to offer wider implications of the collected stories.

Clandinin and Caine (2008) illustrate sociality, temporality, and place as key elements for understanding personal stories. They further explain that sociality includes personal and social conditions that include personal hopes, aspirations, feelings, and reactions, and social environment, surroundings, and existing conditions, respectively. Whereas temporality refers to the development of stories in a particular time period. Furthermore, place refers to the physical environment in which personal experience unfolds over time. Therefore, in this research, I engaged with participants to explore their evolving personal aspirations and feelings.

The critical paradigm of narrative inquiry inhibits understanding of the construction of social reality and knowledge through the complex interaction of social, political, economic, and cultural values, which are mediated by power relations, and of how humans' lived experience is widely constructed through these processes (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). I also used reflexivity, as explained by Pino Gavidia and Adu (2022), in this research process to understand the lived stories of research participants through the lens of what is happening and how. I derived the meaning from Gandhava's experience in the journey to higher education, using the critical paradigm, including reflexivity, which draws on multiple contexts contributing

to their journey. The *Gandharva* stories helped me to navigate how different social, cultural, institutional, and structural contexts shaped their journey to higher education.

Verdia and Poyrazli (2025), in Ahmed (2019), state that caste-based discrimination leaves a significant adverse effect, ranging from trauma across generations, sustained humiliation, and self-devaluation and powerlessness on an individual from the lower caste community. Likewise, *Gandharva*, as one of the so-called lower castes in Nepal, has faced intergenerational barriers to development opportunities, including access to quality education. *Gandharva* face multiple challenges in pursuing higher education. They face economic constraints, systemic barriers, and socio-cultural avoidance yet hold cultural pride and resilience. This portrays a complex picture of *Gandharva*'s educational journey. Hence, from the lived experience of the *Gandharva* people, I have identified the following themes.

System Fuelling Discrimination based on Caste and Exclusion

Gandharva has been viciously crushed in Nepal's caste system, which perpetuated exclusion in socio-cultural settings (Dhakal, 2017; Dhakal, 2021; Moisala, 2013). Schools and educational institutions, as part of society, institutionalize caste-based exclusions and discrimination against *Dalit* students (Chalaune, 2025; Kunwar, 2013;), including *Gandharva*. This has led to a heightened sense of inferiority among *Gandharva* students, contributing to lower confidence and ultimately to falling behind in learning outcomes. This is one of the significant barriers to *Gandharva*'s access, retention, and completion of both school and higher education.

The stories of Mr. Leader, Mr. Development Expert, and Mr. Musician reveal the existence of caste-based discrimination and exclusion in educational institutions, as well as the way the environment demotivates *Gandharva* from pursuing higher education.

Mr. Therapist faced segregation and exclusion when he went to watch television in the houses of non-*Dalit*. He was placed outside the TV room, which exemplifies the way society perpetuated and sustained caste-based discrimination. Mr. Therapist recalled how the teashops sustained caste-based exclusion for *Gandharva* by asking them to wash their tea glasses. Mr. Therapist further reflected that the school textbooks sustained caste-based stereotypes, characterizing *Dalit*' involvement in menial jobs like sewing, sweeping. The derogatory characterization of *Dalit*

individuals in school textbooks discouraged him, and others own the education system and continue them.

Mr. Leader and Mr. Musician also faced direct forms of caste-based discrimination in schools, particularly in cultural and religious spheres within a school environment. They were restricted from entering the Saraswati temple, which was established inside the school. Moreover, offerings to goddess Saraswati were provided separately to Mr. Leader and other *Dalit* students. Likewise, Mr. Musician experienced discrimination based on his incorrect pronunciation relating to his caste identity by a schoolteacher. These incidents showcase how government institutions like schools promote and sustain caste-based exclusion and discrimination and downsize the morale and confidence of students from the *Dalit* community (Maurya, 2018; Simkhada, 2007;), adversely impacting their further education.

Mr. Development Expert's early experience of caste-based exclusion in school created a sense of ignorance towards the school system. The incidence of disallowing *Dalit* children, including Mr. Development Expert, from kitchen work during the school's forest picnic and keeping a separate water pot for *Dalit* and others showcased how the society sustained the institutionalized culture (Bourdieu, 1986) of caste-based exclusion. Likewise, the story of Mr. Leader about imposed restriction for him to entering a temple inside school clearly explains how the government system shas been strengthening caste-based discrimination and playing a key role in demotivating *Dalit* students in fulfilling the curricular requirement. These forms of systemic culture of dominance and segregation downsize the morale and confidence of *Dalit* children in formal education (Maurya, 2018; Simkhada, 2007). These types of entrenched caste-based exclusions demotivated many *Dalit* students, including *Gandharva*, from valuing formal education in academic institutions and led them to drop out early from formal education. Early drop-out closes the door to higher education for *Gandharva*, unlike other privileged caste groups.

The Nepal government system, which embeds the historical reproduction of caste-based hierarchies, has mystified the caste-concept and neglected the voice of *Dalit*, forcing them to exclusion (Pariyar, 2022), using their power as Foucault (1977) argues. Non-*Dalit* attempt to normalize and depoliticize the caste concept and discard the caste system as a product of historical marginalization, structural inequalities, and oppression (Gandhari, 2021). In contrast, *Dalit*, as a result of learning helplessness and self-devaluation, groom themselves, aligning with existing societal norms rather

than raising their voices against oppression (Maurya, 2018; Verdia & Poyrazli, 2025). Hence, power dynamics between *Dalit* and non-*Dalit* contribute to sustaining caste-based discrimination, and its effect is clearly visible in the education sector too, causing lower representation of *Dalit,* including *Gandharva,* in higher education.

Livelihood Priorities Outweighing Education

Lower economic conditions and limited access to financial resources are significant barriers to *Gandharva* pursuing higher education (Panta, 2021, p. 97). *Gandharva's* parents are mostly bound to travel from place to place for their livelihoods, and they usually take their children with them. Hence, *Gandharva* children miss many school classes, fall behind in their learning, and drop out early.

The majority of *Gandharva* do not own land and possess very limited property (Asian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2011). Likewise, due to their lower educational level, they either need to continue playing *Sarangee* door-to-door for a livelihood that has been socially disrespected or adapt to other menial, low-income jobs such as labour, driving, masonry, and so forth (Dhungana, 2017; Panta, 2021). Youths pursuing higher education do not have adequate employment opportunities either (Dhungana, 2021, p.97). Despite their educational status, I see that the majority of them are involved in the traditional occupation of playing and selling *Sarangee* in Thamel, Kathmandu. Among *Gandharva* who have pursued higher education, very few are involved in jobs with International and National Government Organizations (I/NGOs), teaching, and so forth. Irrespective of *Gandharva*'s educational status, neither the state reaches out to *Gandharva*, nor *is Gandharva* aware of the livelihood opportunities offered by the state. During my field visit to Bhansar in Tanahun district, I observed many *Gandharva* crafting Sarangee and selling them to support their livelihoods. They are also transmitting folk songs across generations and preserving *Gandharva* culture and art. However, I did not see any effort by the state to recognize their skills, nor any initiatives to promote their skills to improve livelihood opportunities. Hence, throughout the generations, *Gandharva* continue their traditional occupation, which is considered derogatory in society.

The story of all the research participants shows that they are involved in multiple jobs to support their livelihoods because *Gandharva*'s *Sarangee* and their songs have been categorized as an objectified culture (Bourdieu, 1986) with lower social value in Nepalese society and provide a nominal economic return.

Mr. Leader recalled how his father supported their livelihoods by continuing the traditional occupation of *Sarangee* playing. Mr. Leader was required to engage in multiple income-generating professions, such as running a social business and performing musical shows at different restaurants, to support his family's livelihood and pursue higher education. Mr. Development Expert's story of his focus on earning by selling *Sarangee* in Thamel, Kathmandu, and working at a boarding school demonstrates that their first and foremost focus is on earning. Likewise, Mr. Development Expert and Mr. Leader saw their peers engaging in earnings, which created psychological pressure for them to take money-making jobs. The stories of research participants show that the majority of *Gandharva* children drop out of formal education early due to their livelihood priorities over education and peer pressure to engage in early earning. Likewise, as Mr. Development Expert's story reveals, the historicity of Nepal's caste system has institutionalized a belief that *Dalit* are not entitled to pursue education, and their educational status cannot change their social position, marginalization, and contexts. Subsequently, Nepal's social system has manifested a symbolic culture (Bourdieu, 1986) that is detrimental to *Dalit*' perspective on education. As a result, many *Dalit*, including the *Gandharva* community, prioritize livelihoods outweighing formal education, often relying on socially neglected, culturally devalued, symbolically disrespected low-paid occupations. Furthermore, as Foucault (1977) contends, the power dynamics normalize neglect, disrespect, discrimination, and exclusion based on caste in the name of social norms and values. This has led them to crash into a vicious cycle of education under attainment, poverty, and social marginalization.

Perception of Parent and Community towards Formal Education

Most *Gandharva* parents believe that formal education is a key to their children's success. During my field observation and discussion with the mother of Mr. Musician, the father of Mr. Leader, and the other two *Gandharva* of Bhansar, I found that they hardly understand what level of education is most helpful for progress and prosperity. They understand that graduating from school and high school is enough for formal education. Therefore, the *Gandharva* parents often lack understanding of the full potential of higher education (Gandhari, 2021). Likewise, the societal stigmatization of *Gandharva*'s education further curtailed the emphasis on higher education in the *Gandharva* community (Gandhari, 2021).

As shared by the mother of Mr. Musician, most *Gandharva* parents do not know the process, prerequisites for higher education, or the potential impact of formal education on future prosperity. Likewise, my research participants represent the first generation of *Gandharva* pursuing higher education from their families; therefore, their parents have limited academic circles, networks, and guidance for higher education decision-making. Therefore, *Gandharva* students decide whether to pursue higher education or not after school. *Gandharva* parents are merely supporters of their children's decisions regarding formal education.

Parental role and support were found to be significant in every case where *Gandharva* children achieved higher education. Mr. Musician recalled the way his parents supported him in his formal education. He shared that his parents often motivated him for his education. His parents never pressured him to prioritize earning over education but were always motivated to complete his school and campus education. Despite economic hardships, Mr. Musician's parents supported his education in every way.

Mr. Development Expert recalled his experience of his parents facing derogatory remarks from society. Societal derogatory statements like 'What can a Gaine's son attain even if they perform well in formal education?*'* often reflected community skepticism about *Gandharva*'s potential to succeed in the formal education sector. These societal pressures have discouraged *Gandharva* from pursuing higher education. Mr. Development Expert credits his parents for his successful completion of higher education as they kept him motivated and supported him in his educational journey.

Caste Based Ostracism Within Academic Institutions

Nepal's current formal education system, both in schools and colleges, has manifested caste-based discrimination in subtle but impactful ways (Chalaune, 2025). The environment, teachers, and administrators of educational institutions sustain caste-based discrimination (Maurya, 2018; Simkhada, 2007). As illustrated by Mr. Therapist, the previous curriculum and textbooks significantly promoted caste-based discrimination by illustrating the engagement of *Dalit* in menial jobs; however, the current textbooks merely include such examples. Mr. Musician narrates how he was taunted by seeing school textbooks showcasing *Dalit*' involvement in derogatory works.

Chalaune (2025) acknowledges the absence of, and the necessity for, integrating *Dalit*' traditional skills and technologies into the education curriculum to bring *Dalit* into mainstream, inclusive education. Likewise, as one of the *Dalit* castes, *Gandharva* children hardly feel part of the existing education system, as it does not include *Gandharva* culture, their arts, and music in the curriculum and textbooks, thereby alienating them from the system. The non-indigeneity of the curriculum prevented them from associating with the current education system, which increased their early drop-out and non-completion of higher education.

Mr. Musician's story of demoralization by schoolteachers, which includes his mispronunciations and grammatical errors, demonstrates that the formal school system fails to provide a conducive learning environment for children. Likewise, the teacher, as a system representative, attributed the errors to the caste as a whole and defamed the *Gandharva* caste for its inability to meet curricular requirements. This showcases how the system perpetuates caste-based discrimination. These practices led Mr. Musician to change the subject to avoid such discriminatory practices, which had a wide impact on Mr. Musician's confidence in continuing education with his favourite subject. In Mr. Musician's narrative, the teacher appears as a representative of Nepal's broader community, exemplifying the reproduction of dominant culture in academia. As Bourdieu (1986) states, the culture shaped by the privileged caste group has humiliated and disregarded Mr Musician's linguistic practices, exemplifying the exclusion of embodied cultural capital and the cultural expression of marginalized groups.

Likewise, the story of Mr. Development Expert's exclusion from taking part in Budhanilkantha school's entrance exam, despite his academic excellence, demonstrates the school's discriminatory practices of excluding *Dalit*, including *Gandharva*.

As Bourdieu (1986) explains, the existing socio-cultural capital has been a key context for systemic reproduction and for sustaining caste-based discrimination and exclusion in academic institutions. This includes recurring cast-based discrimination by administrators, teachers, and peer students in academia, and inadequate channelling and transmission about the availability of scholarships for marginalized groups in higher education. The government education system has formalized, sustained, and reproduced existing economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals related to the caste system (Chalaune, 2025; Kunwar, 2013), thereby derogating *Dalit*'

skills, knowledge, culture, and aspirations. Subsequently, *Gandharva,* like other *Dalit* castes, fall behind in achieving higher education.

Cultural Integration in Education

Indigenization education highlights the importance of cultural integration and culturally responsive curriculum. The indigenization of higher education can create and increase ownership and belonging among students, shift power dynamics, and empower marginalized students. A culturally responsive curriculum creates a perfect blend of indigenous and mainstream knowledge (Brigitzer, 2024). However, despite of the richness in indigenous knowledge across Nepal, its higher education system has not succeeded in integrating it into its pedagogy and curriculum. This has resulted disconnection between the indigenous knowledge and higher education, delineation to higher education system, and inability to achieve learning achievement as expected.

One of the key causes of marginalization of indigenous people is their lack of access to quality education, which is developed in their cultural settings, delivered in a culturally sensitive and responsive way, and aligned with their learning needs (Tañedo & Eulatic, 2025). *Gandharva* is born with musical culture; hence, music is an inseparable and inevitable part of *Gandharva*'s culture and livelihood. However, these musical, cultural, and value systems have hardly been reflected in or valued by Nepal's formal education system, which has created a barrier to quality education and added another dimension to their marginalization. Nepal's current formal and indigenous education encompasses certain instructional approaches (Niure, 2019) with a clear focus on learning outcomes, at the expense of indigenous skills and knowledge. Therefore, the education system's inability to recognize *Gandharva*'s culture led to Gandharva's exclusion from higher education as well.

Mr. Therapist's story shows that *Sarangee* (a traditional musical instrument of *Gandharva*) has always been his means of livelihood and a source of cultural pride. He played *Sarangee* first on a Thamel street, and now in different avenues (restaurants, hotels, and so on). He also uses *Sarangee* for musical therapy, which is an important economic source. However, Mr. Therapist never witnessed a connection between his culture and Nepal's formal education system. This missing connection between *Gandharva* culture and education may be one factor contributing to the low number of *Gandharva* representations in Nepal's higher education.

Mr. Development Expert shared his bitter experience, demonstrating how societal values defamed *Gandharva*'s musical culture. He recalled the moment when

he tried to avoid his classmates when meeting in Thamel, as he was with *Sarangee*. Mr. Development Expert left the campus in Kathmandu and went to Pokhara for his livelihood, to avoid meeting with classmates in Thamel. Mr. Development Expert reflects that he would not need to hide his cultural talent if the Nepal education system had valued it.

As Bourdieu (1986) stressed, the culture, aspirations, and socialization of dominant communities' social and cultural capital have been incorporated into Nepal's higher education curriculum, neglecting the knowledge and skills of marginalized groups. This has enabled privileged groups to fulfill the curricular requirements, leaving others segregated from the education system.

Lack of Education Justice

Rana (2017) argues that poor educational status has been one of the key causes for *Dalit* to be excluded, vulnerable, and discriminated against, and educational marginalization is a result of the sustained socio-cultural and religious caste-based hierarchy. Likewise, *Gandharva*, as a *Dalit* caste, has not been able to attain or agitate for a higher level of education. Hence, Nepal's education system is yet to recognize the exclusion of *Dalit* as a product of social, cultural, and religious practices of caste-based discrimination and address such disparities to inform inclusive education.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015, Higher Education Policy 2015, and Guidelines on the provision of scholarships for higher education 2022 have provided a policy foundation to support marginalized groups, including *Dalit*, to pursue higher education. However, inadequate translation of policies into practice, weak governance mechanisms (Milligan et al., 2025), and decision-makers' disinterest in implementing inclusion policies (Gandhari, 2021) have created significant barriers to ensuring equitable access to and completion of higher education in Nepal. Nepal's formal education system has failed to recognize and address discrimination within educational institutions and communities (Chalaune, 2025), to integrate cultural heritage and identity into pedagogy (Niure, 2019), and to represent marginalized communities (Gandhari, 2021), thereby sustaining inequality. The current education system in Nepal devalues, defames, and stigmatizes *Gandharva*'s cultural practices, jeopardizing educational justice. Nepal's education system has defined learning outcomes as key indicators of success, derived from the notion of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which

valued the culture of privileged caste-groups and devalued *Dalit* culture in formal education. This is a prime cause of educational injustice.

The story of Mr. Development Expert demonstrates the systemic neglect of excluding marginalized and *Dalit* communities in Nepal's policy processes, as Mr. Development Expert witnessed the exclusion of *Dalit* communities in Nepal's higher education policy development processes. Furthermore, his story exemplifies how the system blames the *Dalit* community, including *Gandharva*, for their inability to acquire higher education, surpassing the systemic disparity in providing equitable education for all.

Likewise, Mr. Therapist reflects that the inclusion of *Gandharva*'s indigenous culture in university education may help connect *Gandharva* with Nepal's formal education system. However, that was not the case as the current education system has devalued *Gandharva*'s musical skills and cultural knowledge. The experience of Mr. Musician also demonstrates this, as he witnessed how the current education system outlawed *Gandharva*'s arts and culture and instead sustained exclusion and discrimination.

The historical development, transmission, and reproduction of socio-cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and power dynamics (Foucault, 1977) have been key in sustaining the lack of educational justice in Nepal. The social and cultural capital values the culture, knowledge, skills, aspirations, and practices of dominant caste groups, and the education system fosters such practices. Consequently, education becomes easier for the privileged caste groups, whereas it is difficult for the marginalized groups. This leaves a question of equitable access to higher education envisioned by Nepal's Higher Education Policy 2015. Despite policy provisions for inclusive education, there is a clear gap in translating these provisions into practice. This may be due either to recognition of gaps in access to higher education or to a lack of interest in reinforcing inclusion policies. These contexts have been mediated by power, which has been instrumental in sustaining educational gaps between *Dalit* and others.

Perception Towards Education: A Tool for Immediate Earning

Education is essential for developing skilled human capital, which is key to the country's economic sustainability (Alali, 2022). Alali (2022) further stresses that quality education is essential for economic development, increased productivity, and higher individual income. Thomas et al. (2014) argue that higher education is essential

for advancing knowledge and its application to the economic sustainability of the nation, and that it contributes to increased productivity, social welfare, and empowerment. Higher education is critically important for high social and economic returns and for fostering democracy (Gandhari, 2021). Despite these significances, the majority of *Gandharva* fail to recognize education as a transformative tool and its potential for a sustainable and prosperous future. Many *Gandharva*, who lack academic or educational backgrounds, see education as a tool for immediate earnings. Hence, instead of investing time in education, *Gandharva* in most places craft *Sarangee*, sell them, and make money immediately. This has prioritized immediate earnings through other activities over long-term investment in education.

Mr. Crafter shared that he could make money by crafting and selling *Sarangee*s in the local market, which provides both immediate and sustainable income.

During community observations, I found that many of the *Gandharva* living in Bhansar, Tanahun invested time in crafting and selling *Sarangee* in the local market. They opine that the ultimate goal of education and life is to earn money, and selling provides them with an opportunity for immediate earnings.

Society sustains the belief that *Dalit* are not entitled to education, and that education cannot alter their lived contexts. Likewise, Mr. Crafter's statement reflects a lack of educational justice (Milligan et al., 2025) as Nepal's education governance fails to communicate the benefits of higher education to its citizens. As a result of this understanding, *Gandharva* is always engaged in menial, low-income work and disregards the importance of education. Hence, this understanding fosters a cyclic effect on *Gandharva*'s poverty, marginalization, and discrimination.

Peer Pressure and Family Responsibilities: Barrier to Education

Rai and Ghimire (2025) stress that *Dalit* students drop out early from school education as they need to help in household chores and engage in daily income generation activities. Baruwal and Pokharel (2025) note both positive and negative effects of peer pressure and contend that school absence is an adverse impact of it. Likewise, *Gandharva* children and youth are bound to engage in income-generating activities to support their families' livelihoods, and they leave school seeing other *Gandharva* supporting their families in fulfilling livelihoods.

The majority of *Gandharva* youths are involved in early earning, primarily due to two reasons: i. to fulfill immediate livelihood needs (Panta, 2021), ii. Social

practices of early earning. Hence, *Gandharva* youths often face peer pressure to engage in immediate earning, irrespective of their ambition for education.

Mr. Leader and Mr. Development Expert shared that many of their childhood friends began earning money early by playing *Sarangee* on buses and supporting their families. This led them to drop out of school. Hence, the *Gandharva* community expects its youths to support their families financially, which often clashes with the aspiration to pursue higher education.

Mr. Therapist also witnessed peer pressure to engage in income-generating activities, as his childhood friends had already begun supporting their families financially. Mr. Therapist further noted that the pressure to earn immediately, coupled with limited parental awareness of children's education, has sustained a low level of academic engagement in the community.

Gandharva children and youth are categorized under the marginalized *Dalit* caste in Nepal's social and cultural contexts. They experience strong pressure to engage in income-generating activities at an early age. The research participants have shared that they were socialized to perform economic and caretaker roles at a young age, resulting in a low focus on education, lower attendance, and early dropout.

As embedded in Bourdieu's (1986) concept of socio-cultural capital, the narratives of *Gandharva* demonstrate how their socialization for early engagement in earning and caring shapes their habitus, influences their aspirations towards education, and normalizes their limited participation in formal schooling. Subsequently, the institutionalized culture of *Gandharva,* which prioritizes earning over formal education, creates a significant barrier to higher education.

These educational disadvantages are further exacerbated by unequal power dynamics across sectors. As Foucault (1977) contends, the formal education system has been a legitimate space to strengthen the social norms and values of dominant caste groups, and *Gandharva,* along with other marginalized groups, often face subtle and direct forms of discrimination and exclusion related to their caste identity and cultural capital. Consequently, *Gandharva* internalize these structural barriers as personal incompetencies and incapabilities, leading them to be excluded from higher education opportunities. This, in turn, isolates *Gandharva* from having the potential benefit of social mobility and economic prosperity that higher education can bring.

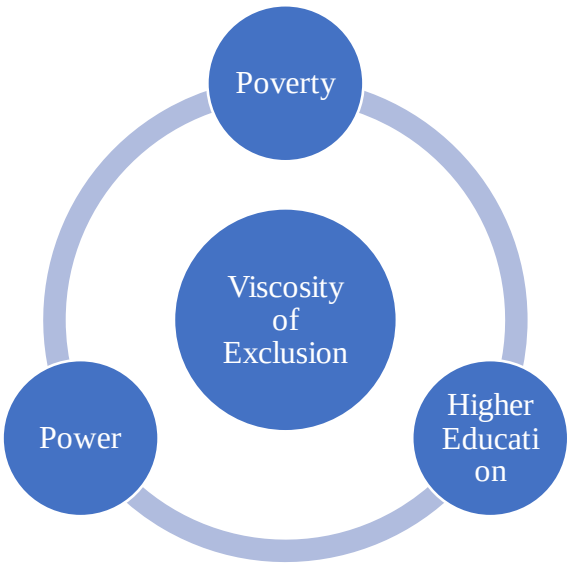
Power Relation Between *Dalit* and Non-*Dalit* in Pursuing Higher Education

In higher education, systemic exclusion based on caste is embedded in a subtle but powerful way for the further exclusion of *Dalit* communities. This structural barrier has blocked *Dalit* communities, including *Gandharva*, from economic prosperity, social dignity, and access to other opportunities.

Poverty, power, and higher education status interplay intricately to result in and sustain the viscosity of exclusion, as shown in Figure 2. Poverty hinders accessing higher education, which has been dominated by neoliberalism (Chalaune, 2025; Mampaey, 2017) and profit-centered business (Mampaey, 2017). People with lower economic status are less likely to have access to HE opportunities, whereas the opposite is true for those with economically sound backgrounds. Likewise, poverty prevents people from accessing decision-making positions and from acquiring power and control over resources (Bishwakarma, 2016). Acquisition of higher education is more likely to contribute to deconstructing poverty, gaining decision-making positions, and, subsequently, controlling resources. Power inherits the potential opportunity to develop and implement policies and programs to deconstruct poverty and increase HE opportunities. Hence, poverty, power, and HE influence each other and are intricately responsible for sustaining the extent of inclusion and exclusion. Likewise, exclusion determines access to HE opportunities, power acquisition, and the extent of poverty.

Figure 2

An Intricate Relationship between Power, Poverty, and HE Results in Exclusion



The *Gandharva* people have a lower HE status, which led them to be involved in menial and low-paid jobs and resulted in poverty. The lower HE subjugated them to accessing power holding positions, which subsequently extricate the opportunities to develop and execute HE friendly policies and programs for *Gandharva*-like marginalized populations. Likewise, the poverty-stricken *Gandharva* people cannot afford the HE opportunities and their associated cost, which subsequently ostracizes them from HE opportunities and power positions. In addition, due to the lack of *Gandharva* people in power positions, the HE policies that address the suffering and difficulties of *Gandharva* people are not in practice. Moreover, the *Gandharva* people who have been victimized by long-standing exclusion have been contributing to sustaining poverty, lower HE access and completion, and being disadvantaged in power positions. Hence, the systemic exclusion of *Dalit*, including *Gandharva,* is a significant barrier to their potential for prosperity.

***Gandharva*'s Resilience and Aspirations**

Despite various challenges, many of the *Gandharva* demonstrated resilience and aspirations to pursue higher education. Their parental support was key for resilience, and sustained the community's discriminatory practices also increased their resilience, and aspiration for doing good for their own community. This has collectively led them to continue and complete higher education.

The stories of all research participants demonstrate that they understand that caste-based discrimination is part of the communal practices they should follow. *Gandharva* shows resilience by accepting the societal segregation based on caste hierarchies. Likewise, *Gandharva* aspires to do something good for their community and to expand their caste identity. These resilient natures and aspirations lead them to complete higher education.

As Foucault (1977) explains about the influence of power in driving social norms and social perception, the privileged caste groups strategically use their economic, social, and cultural capital to sustain caste-based discrimination and exclusion in every sector. These legitimize the concept that *Dalit* are not subjected to their own education, social prestige, and cultural recognition. Subsequently, *Dalit* accept caste-based discrimination as a part of social structure without questioning, which has led them to be marginalized in every sector, and education is not an exception. Hence, even *Gandharva*'s aspirations and resilience showcase the

existence of rampant caste-based discrimination and its continuation as a part of social and cultural norms.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I developed themes outlining the key barriers and supporting the contexts for *Gandhrarva* in pursuing higher education. The study showed that systemic and structural exclusion includes the prevalence of exclusion in academic institutions, *Gandharva*'s livelihood priorities and their focus in immediate earning, unsupportive community perception towards *Gandharva*'s education, isolation of Gandharva's cultural knowledge and tradition from the formal education system were appeared as key barriers for *Gandharva*'s education, whereas parental support and their strong resilience towards existing discrimination and exclusion based on caste, and their aspiration to do something good for their community were appeared as key supporting contexts for their formal education. I also interlinked their connections to Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital and Foucault's power in shaping these barriers.

CHAPTER VI
MY REFLECTION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I have presented my research experience, including my journey through the development of a research topic, thematic areas, and research questions. I have included my reflection on my research questions, which focus on the unfolding narratives of *Gandharva* in pursuit of higher education. Likewise, this chapter also examines how I have reflected on the system-led discrimination practices that sustain exclusion. I have also explained the interrelationships among power, poverty, and higher education to sustain power and control in society.

My Research Agenda

As a member of the *Gandharva* community, I have observed that most of them do not pursue or complete higher education. I have a self-reflection that the community has been lagging in economic, political, social, and other areas, primarily due to their educational status. Among them, their lack of higher education has led them to crash in the vicious cycle of poverty and discrimination, ultimately leading them to live a derogatory and unwanted life. Likewise, I have witnessed that the majority of *Gandharva* youths who passed the school-leaving certificate with good marks and division, particularly from the Gorkha district, fail to complete higher education, which has led me to focus my research question on this area. Furthermore, I have always wanted to conduct research that could add knowledge to my own community. Through these thought processes and my willingness to contribute to the *Gandharva* community, I have chosen a research topic related to higher education within the *Gandharva* community.

Formulation of My Research Question

I have my own experience with the journey to higher education. I experience motivation, discrimination, support, and barriers in my educational journey. Similarly, other *Gandharva* who embarked on educational journeys may have interesting stories and experiences, and their narratives may underpin messages for the broader community. Hence, I sought to document narratives of *Gandharva* who completed or dropped out from the higher education.

In the beginning, I wanted to understand why many *Gandharva* cannot complete higher education despite their good marks in school. Likewise, I also wanted

to see how far the exclusion and caste-based discrimination contribute to the un/completion of *Gandharva*'s higher education. I received a suggestion from my professor that the research areas appear to hold hypotheses and could fall under the quantitative research. Hence, I decided to collect *Gandharva*' experiences of their journey to higher education and examine how systemic power relations between *Dalit* and others shape thei*r* pursuit of higher education.

Responding to My Research Question

I collected experiences from four *Gandharva* and combined my own experience to respond to my research questions, which are specific to the experience of *Gandharva* in their journey to higher education and to the embedded power relations that contribute to the exclusion of *Gandharva* in higher education. I synthesized stories about four *Gandharva* youths and my own journey to address my research question outlined in Chapter I.

Social Exclusion (Inclusion) in Formal Education

The majority of *Gandharva* children experience some form of caste-based discrimination in school formation education, either in a direct or subtle way. They face discrimination from teachers, school administrators, and peers, which demotivates *Gandharva* from complying with the formal education system. Primarily, *Dalit* students, including *Gandharva,* mostly face discrimination during religious functions in schools. They are excluded from kitchen-related works, entering temples and other public and private spaces. Likewise, *Gandharva* are being criticized for their inability to fulfil the curricular requirements, demoralizing their caste origin. Moreover, old school textbooks showcasing *Dalit*' engagement in menial jobs also trigger children's derogatory perception towards the *Dalit* community.

The incidence of caste-base discrimination is not clearly visible in higher education institutions. However, they foster systemic exclusion of *Dalit* in accessing and utilizing higher education opportunities.

Power Relation Between *Dalit* and Non-*Dalit* in Pursuing Higher Education

As Foucault (1977) explains, power dynamics have played an important role in restricting *Gandharva* from pursuing higher education in the Nepali context. Nepal's social norms, values, and procedures are influenced by the culture and practices of dominant caste-groups. In contrast, the social norms stagnate the culture of *Dalit* and marginalized castes. Subsequently, as a part of society, the academic institutions have embedded the same culture and have become a space for the

reproduction of caste-based ostracism. The power dynamics in the Nepali context have shaped formal education as a token of knowledge, competency, and excellence. Hence, the privileged caste group has early exposure to education as part of their culture and has easy access to higher education opportunities. In contrast, *Dalit* including *Gandharva* who has early exposure to cultural tradition, musical skills, and arts do not comply the educational requirement. Moreover, *Gandharva* have limited access to and representation in decision-making positions. Hence, these unequal power relations sustain the caste-based discrimination in academic institutions.

These disparities are further exacerbated by socio-cultural capital sustained in the Nepali context, as explained by Bourdieu (1986). *Gandharva* has been socialized to engage early in income-generation activities and in caring for parents and siblings, resulting in minimal engagement in formal schooling. Likewise, the existence of caste-based discrimination based on caste identity and their culture further demotivates *Dalit*, including *Gandharva,* to engage in the formal education system. This collectively contributes to *Dalit*, including *Gandharva,* to prioritize earning over formal education. Moreover, *Dalit*, including *Gandharva,* internalize the systemic barrier to higher education as their personal incompetencies and normalize their limited engagement in higher education. Subsequently, *Dalit*, including *Gandharva,* have limited access to and completion of higher education in the Nepali context.

System's Gap in Communicating the Importance of Higher Education

I visited the *Gandharva* community and its settlement area in Bhansar, Tanahun district, Nepal. I saw many *Gandharva* engaged in *Sarangee* crafting using a locally grown *Bakaino* tree (Chinaberry tree). They can sell them in the local market or in Kathmandu, which is an immediate source of income. Hence, *the Gandharva* community prioritizes livelihoods over education, which prevents them from pursuing higher education. In contrast, the government has failed to communicate the importance of higher education and its potential to transform the lives of marginalized caste-groups like the *Gandharva*. This is the largest loophole in Nepal's formal education system.

Moreover, I also witnessed other nearby communities crafting and selling *Sarangee* in Bhansar, Tanahun. This indicates that the *Gandharva*' skill in crafting *Sarangee* has significant potential for economic returns. However, sustained caste-based discrimination has led them to struggle for economic, social, and cultural advancement. I also observed that the majority of *Gandharva* communities engage in

some form of earning activities and send their children or grandchildren to boarding schools, hoping these will build a strong foundation for them. Therefore, parental awareness of education has been increasing; however, the state mechanism to ensure their participation in mainstream education is still lacking.

Gap Between HE Curriculum and *Gandharva* Culture

The *Gandharva* community has a rich culture. They craft and play *Sarangee*, own traditional songs and dances, and so forth. The *Gandharva* culture truly represents a typical Nepali culture and identity. However, this cultural capital is merely embedded in higher wducation. Hence, the *Gandharva* individual who socializes with this cultural capital feels isolated while pursuing higher education. They never own the content, nor are they motivated to fulfill curricular requirements. Subsequently, they fail to complete higher education. Hence, there is a huge gap between *Gandharva*'s cultural capital and the formal higher education system in Nepal.

Conclusion

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has ensured compulsory and free basic education, free secondary education, free university education for the *Dalit* community with scholarships, and no discrimination based on caste or sex. Furthermore, Nepal’s Education Policy 2019 has been enacted to ensure the implementation of these provisions. Despite these provisions, the data show a clear inequality in education, particularly in access and quality. *Dalit,* who comprise about 13% of Nepal's total population, face barriers to higher education opportunities, including *Gandharva*.

Dalit children experience untouchability, exclusion from participation in religious feasts in schools such as Saraswati Puja, restriction in entering a temple in school, humiliation by teachers and peer students for mispronunciation of Nepali words, and so forth. Likewise, they are restricted to touch water-pot in public taps, entering public temples. These discriminatory practices have been transmitted across generations, accepted them and followed as social norms. These school-based and communal discriminatory practices have created substantial barriers for *Dalit* children to access, continue, and complete formal education. The inability to complete school education has apparently impacted the rate of their higher education completion.

In university education, *Gandharva* and other *Dalit* students do not see and experience discrimination and exclusion visibly, specifically in Kathmandu; however,

they experience social distancing, low learning expectation from teachers, and poor peer networking. These subtle forms of exclusion waken their confidence and result adverse impact on their higher education studies. Likewise, *Dalit* also experience discrimination while renting a home. *Dalit* students cannot analyse the systemic exclusion embedded in the higher education system. The merit-based higher education system, the illusion of implementing an inclusion policy in higher education, and the profit-centric higher education system in Nepal are key barriers to *Dalit*' access to and completion of higher education. In contrast, *Dalit* students see their incompetence and poverty as a barrier to higher education, which is a systemic-induced concept and is discriminatory and exclusionary in itself. Likewise, the disconnect between *Gandharva* culture and the higher education system has led *Gandharva* to isolate themselves from higher education opportunities, resulting in lower rates of access to and completion of higher education.

Besides, due to their low economic status, *Gandharva* children often struggle to fulfil the opportunity cost of education and are responsible for fulfilling livelihood needs. Likewise, they see their peers earning money and supporting their families early, creating peer pressure to get involved in earning. Moreover, *Gandharva* children and youth see immediate earnings from crafting and selling *Sarangee* or from singing on a public bus or in a non-*Dalit* community settlement. These contexts lead *Gandharva* to drop out of both the school and higher education.

Gandharva's parents aspire to educate their children and provide support as well. However, they have inadequate awareness about up to which level their support needs to be continued and what level of education may cater to their children's wellbeing and prosperity. Hence, the majority of *Gandharva* parents assume that SLC and +2 education is adequate for their children. In contrast, the community support mechanism is detrimental to *Dalit*' pursuit of education. They use humiliating remarks for *Dalit*' success and even failure in education. The narratives of my research participants demonstrate that *Dalit* are being derogated on many occasions, irrespective of their educational status. However, the extremity of discrimination is comparatively lower in the case of educated *Dalit*.

Despite these adversities, some *Gandharva* have successfully pursued higher education. They show a greater level of resilience towards caste-based discrimination and exclusion. Amid hardships and caste-based cultural practices of exclusion in both formal education institutions and communities, a handful of *Gandharva* courageously

faced these challenges and overcame the barriers, with their parental support always at the forefront. Likewise, the aspiration to do something good for the *Gandharva* community has also motivated them to pursue higher education and complete their studies.

Recognizing both community-level and academic-level exclusions and disparities, Nepal's higher education system can ensure education justice for all through reaching marginalized and underprivileged populations, identifying their adversities, valuing and integrating their cultural assets within the education system, and reshaping the implementation mechanism to translate higher education policies into practices, and ensuring these reforms implemented effectively and equitably.

Implications

This may be the first study of the *Gandharva* experience of their journey to higher education, adding to the *Gandharva* literature. There is no one in the *Gandharva* community who has completed a PhD, which underscores gaps in policy and practice that hinder equitable access to higher education. Hence, this study provides critical insights into the contexts that contribute to the (un)completion of higher education among *Gandharva* communities. These contexts can also provide a foundation for adopting policies and practices to include marginalized communities in higher education.

Gandharva's access to and completion of higher education is of great importance to address stereotypical thinking about *Gandharva*, their traditional occupation, and to add value to *Sarangee*. *Gandharva*'s higher education is also significant in fostering democratic socialization (Reinders et al., 2020) and providing them a voice to stand against exclusion and discrimination (Post et al., 2004). Likewise, for *Gandharva*'s economic prosperity, access to higher education is essential, as it can break the vicious cycle of poverty by leveraging their access to power, property, and prestige. Furthermore, to ensure equitable and accessible quality higher education as embedded in Nepal's Constitution 2015 and Nepal's Higher Education Policy 2015, *Gandharva*'s access to higher education appears essential.

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