

IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE OF DALIT YOUTH IN URBAN CONTEXT:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Ankita Paudel BK* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in Development Studies* presented on *8 January 2026* entitled *Identity and Experience of Dalit Youth in Urban Context: A Narrative Inquiry*.

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This study is an exploration of the lives of Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu, focusing on how they narrate, negotiate, and assert their caste identity in daily life. Although Nepal has progressive laws against discrimination, and people generally view urban spaces as casteless, caste still somehow influences the interactions of social life, the formation of identities, and everyday belonging. Nevertheless, little has been done to explore how Dalit youths are affected by caste in urban settings outside of the structural inequalities.

To fill this gap, the research explored how Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu narrate, negotiate, and assert their identity as a caste in their daily lives. The study objectives were to investigate the development of caste awareness, discuss identity management strategies, and learn how Dalit youth respond to subtle forms of discrimination. The study is based on the first-hand experiences of four educated Dalit youth, Abhisha, Avash, Sita, and Meena, using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach.

The results demonstrate a continuum of caste awareness, ranging from delayed awareness to early critical awareness. The strategies participants used to manage identities included passing, concealment, and selective disclosure. Although these strategies were occasionally protective, they had a psychosocial cost, such as identity fatigue, anxiety, and conditional belonging. The research also demonstrates how caste discrimination in urban settings operates through microaggressions,

institutionalization, and daily interactions. Meanwhile, the agency manifested through emotional resistance, digital protest, identity expression, and strategic disclosure, as proven by participants.

Drawing on Narrative Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Intersectionality, the analysis illustrates how caste intersects with gender, class mobility, and urban experiences to shape various identity negotiations. Placing the narratives of Dalit youth at the center, this study puts the notion of casteless urban modernity into perspective and urges scholars and policymakers to pay closer attention to insidious caste discrimination as a research and policy focus.

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शोधसार

विकास शिक्षामा दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर डिग्रीका लागि अंकिता पौडेल बि.क.को शोधप्रबन्धको शिर्षक “शहरी परिवेशमा दलित युवाहरूको पहिचान र अनुभव: एक संकथन” २४ पुष २०८२ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो ।

उप. प्रा. सुरेश गौतम, पीएचडी

शोध निर्देशक

यो अध्ययन शहरी काठमाडौंका दलित युवाहरूको जीवनको अन्वेषण हो, जसमा उनीहरूले आफ्नो जातीय पहिचानलाई दैनिक जीवनमा कसरी वर्णन गर्छन्, व्यवस्थापन गर्छन् र प्रस्तुत गर्छन् भन्ने कुरामा केन्द्रित गरिएको छ। नेपालमा विभेदविरुद्ध प्रगतिशील कानूनहरू भए पनि र शहरी क्षेत्रलाई सामान्यतया जातविहीन स्थानको रूपमा हेरिए पनि, जातले अझै सामाजिक अन्तरक्रिया, पहिचान निर्माण र दैनिक सम्बन्धमा सूक्ष्म रूपमा प्रभाव पारिरहेको छ। तथापि, संरचनात्मक असमानताभन्दा बाहिर गएर शहरी परिवेशमा दलित युवाहरूले जातलाई कसरी अनुभव गर्छन् भन्ने विषयमा सीमित अध्ययनहरू मात्र भएका छन्।

यस अनुसन्धानले यही खाडललाई पूरा गर्न शहरी काठमाडौंका दलित युवाहरूले आफ्नो जातीय पहिचानलाई दैनिक जीवनमा कसरी बुझ्छन्, व्यवस्थापन र व्यक्त गर्छन् भन्ने विषयमा अध्ययन गरेको छ। अध्ययनका मुख्य उद्देश्यहरूमा जातीय चेतनाको विकास प्रक्रिया बुझ्नु, पहिचान व्यवस्थापनका रणनीतिहरूको विश्लेषण गर्नु र सूक्ष्म विभेदका रूपहरूमा दलित युवाहरूले कसरी प्रतिक्रिया दिन्छन् भन्ने कुरा अध्ययन गर्नु रहेका छन्। यो अध्ययन चार जना शिक्षित दलित युवा: अभिषा, आवाश, सीता र मीना, का प्रत्यक्ष अनुभवहरूमा आधारित रहेको छ र कथात्मक अनुसन्धान विधि प्रयोग गरिएको छ।

अध्ययनका निष्कर्षहरूले जातीय चेतनाको निरन्तरता देखाउँछन्, जसमा ढिलो रूपमा जातीय पहिचानबारे सचेत हुने अवस्थादेखि प्रारम्भिक आलोचनात्मक चेतनासम्मका अनुभवहरू समावेश छन्। सहभागीहरूले आफ्नो पहिचान व्यवस्थापन गर्न अपनाएका रणनीतिहरूमा आफ्नो जात लुकाएर प्रस्तुत हुनु, जात लुकाउनु र छनोट गरेर मात्र जानकारी दिनु समावेश थिए। यी रणनीतिहरू कहिलेकाहीँ सुरक्षात्मक भए पनि, यसले पहिचान थकान, चिन्ता र सर्तसहितको स्वीकृतिजस्ता मनोसामाजिक असरहरू पनि निम्त्याएको देखिन्छ।

अनुसन्धानले शहरी परिवेशमा जातीय विभेद कसरी सूक्ष्म व्यवहार, संस्थागत संरचना र दैनिक सामाजिक अन्तरक्रियामार्फत सञ्चालन हुन्छ भन्ने पनि देखाएको छ। यसैबीच, सहभागीहरूले भावनात्मक प्रतिरोध, डिजिटल माध्यममार्फत विरोध, पहिचानको अभिव्यक्ति र रणनीतिक रूपमा आफ्नो पहिचान प्रकट गर्ने माध्यमबाट आफ्नो सक्रियता प्रदर्शन गरेका थिए।

कथात्मक पहिचान, सामाजिक पहिचान सिद्धान्त र अन्तरसम्बन्धीय पहिचानको अवधारणा का सैद्धान्तिक आधारमा गरिएको विश्लेषणले जात कसरी लैङ्गिकता, वर्गगत गतिशीलता र शहरी अनुभवहरूसँग अन्तरसम्बन्धित भएर पहिचानको जटिल व्यवस्थापनलाई प्रभाव पार्छ भन्ने देखाउँछ। दलित युवाहरूका कथाहरूलाई केन्द्रमा राख्दै, यस अध्ययनले शहरी आधुनिकता जातविहीन छ भन्ने धारणामाथि प्रश्न उठाएको छ र सूक्ष्म जातीय विभेदलाई अनुसन्धान तथा नीतिगत प्राथमिकतामा राख्न विद्वानहरू र नीतिनिर्माताहरूलाई आग्रह गरेको छ।

.....

अंकिता पौडेल बि.क.

उपाधि उमेदवार

२४ पुष २०८२

This dissertation entitled *Identity and Experience of Dalit Youth in Urban Context: A Narrative Inquiry*, presented by *Ankita Paudel BK* on 8 January 2026.

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DECLARATION

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

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Ankita Paudel BK

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8 January 2026

DEDICATION

To all those baffled by the system and struggling to find clarity-

May we be able to cut and see through the distorted reality.

To all those uncovering themselves-

May we be able to recognize ourselves- beyond the prescribed labels.

To all those labelled the 'Untouchables' -

May we be able to dismantle in becoming the untamed.

To all those who have been rejected-

May we rejoice in the rejection.

To all those who are hurting,

May we find peace in knowing- rejection is redirection.

To all those who are redirecting-

May we think outside the box?

To all those who dared to- not to 'fit-in' -

May we be able to find one another- connect, build, and thrive.

To all the beings,

May we hold on to the essence of love.

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For me, this study has been a personal and academic journey shaped by learning, growth, and the encouragement of many people. Their inputs and encouragement have been a part of this journey.

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I am grateful to the participants- Abhisha, Avash, Meena, and Sita. The heart of this research is the courage, vulnerability, and trust in willingness to share the stories about personal lives. Their stories are forms of resistance and of telling the truth, shedding light on caste realities in urban Nepal. Their insights have contributed to this study, and I am forever thankful.

Lastly, being a researcher with so many identities attached, I look back at my own experience in this research, not merely as an academic endeavor, but as a very personal one. It was a challenge and a great strength to me to navigate the intricacies of my own experience as an insider- my own experiences of caste, of joys, and struggles.

To my friends, colleagues, and broader academic and activist circles, I want to thank you for the invaluable support, thought-provoking discussions, and solidarity.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DLE	District Level Examination
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others
MA	Muluki Ain
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SLC	School Leaving Certificate

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

The atmosphere in the room, already dense with expectation and the aroma of unfamiliar spices, grew noticeably tense.

“Who are you?”

The question, gentle yet piercing, came from across the table, my to-be fiancé’s father. It hung in the air like smoke from a fire, heavy, uncomfortable, unspoken. I felt I was grasping for air to voice my truth.

With a shaking voice, I replied, “If you had asked me this question a few years ago, I might have simply said my name is Ankita Paudel, but these days I choose to introduce myself as ‘Ankita Paudel Bishwakarma’.”

The next question was, “What is your name in your citizenship?” He wasn’t asking about my dreams, character, or aspirations. Hearing that question, I was taken aback. It felt less like an introduction and more like an ancient negotiation.

With this line of thought, this paper does not open with an abstract theory, but rather a lived experience. In particular, it analyses caste not as a historical artifact or a rural phenomenon, but as the reality of Dalit youth living in urban Kathmandu. Though Kathmandu is traditionally thought of as a modern and progressive city, it is still run by inherited hierarchies that subtly influence social interactions, access to opportunities, and a sense of belonging (Bohara, 2025; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

In this study, I have drawn on my personal experiences to build on the rationale, state the problem, clarify the purpose of the research question, and underscore the significance of centralizing the voices of Dalit youths.

Connecting the Dots: Realization of the Surname

The process of discovering self in a caste-reliant society is hardly easy; instead, it passes through stages of silence, resistance, fear, and negotiation at all times. I was born to a Dalit family, and my birth certificate prints my name as Ankita Bishwakarma, which publicly identifies my birth caste. However, for most of my childhood and the beginning of my teenage life, I nearly never used it, having buried it deep, like a taboo secret, beneath layers of pretending it did not exist. In a society where surnames spoke hierarchies louder than words could, the term Bishwakarma was a brand of vulnerability that was an invitation to be ostracized, more than an

invitation to be looked at, and the pain of untouchability even in the anonymity of a big city like Kathmandu

To avoid this stigma, in 1996, when I joined Star Public School, I was enrolled as Ankita Paudel. At the time, I had no idea what that name signified. Caste was something I encountered only in schoolbooks, often described by the familiar phrase: "Nepal chaar jaat, chhattis barna ko sajha fulbari ho", Nepal is a shared garden of four castes and thirty-six sub-castes." It sounded peaceful and poetic. I didn't yet understand, nor did it occur to me, how much weight a name could carry.

That innocence changed dramatically in the year 2005, right before my Grade 8 District Level Examination (DLE). Our small house had a pre-exam atmosphere, with tons of books on the table, and my heart was already racing with test anxiety. As my father was helping me fill out the registration form, he stopped. His voice was constant when he told me, 'Write BK, after your name'. My face was wrinkled with confusion, and a knot of anxiety turned my stomach. 'Why, Dad?' I asked, my voice was small. He gazed at me full upon, and there was an aura in his eyes that told incomplete tales, and answered, because we are Kami. We are Dalit."

The words landed like a sudden storm, dark and disorienting. I didn't fully understand the term "Dalit" yet, its full depth of pain and exclusion, but fragments from social studies class rushed back: Kami as a lower caste, untouchable, lesser. A wave of heaviness crashed over me, hot shame flushing my cheeks, my chest tightening as if the room itself had shrunk. My hands trembled slightly on the form; innocence cracked open, revealing something raw and burdensome.

That day, caste became intensely real to me- no longer just a distant textbook word in a poetic phrase about Nepal's "shared garden," but a heavy chain tied to my name.

This newfound awareness deepened a year later, during a dance class at school. My teacher, who shared the upper-caste surname "Paudyal", noticed that I hadn't pierced my nose, a traditional marker often associated with certain ethnic or caste groups. She singled me out, asking innocently enough at first, then followed with the probing question: "Timi Shudra wala Paudel ho?"

Another student, puzzled, asked what "Shudra" meant, and the teacher replied without hesitation: "The lowest caste, the ones whose water we cannot drink." The words landed like a slap, exposing my hidden caste in front of everyone.

I pretended not to understand, mumbling something vague and looking away. But I understood it perfectly. Shame and silence filled the classroom; while maybe the others shrugged it off or didn't fully grasp the weight, for me, it made me feel small, exposed, and deeply shameful- shrinking into myself as the reality of my identity pierced deeper.

Over the years that followed, I used "BK" as my secret shield on forms or when necessary, though it still felt like a heavy, shameful burden. Pretending to be upper caste, like using just "Paudel," brought fleeting relief: I could laugh with friends and join conversations without wary glances, feeling almost normal. Yet this safety was bittersweet, leaving me empty and alone; a stranger in my own skin, torn between worlds where I belonged to neither.

Scholars describe 'coming out as Dalit' not as a one-time event, but as a daily struggle involving fear, prolonged silences, and exhausting resistance (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). Folmar highlights that claiming Dalit identity requires courage to assert one's dignity amid pain (Folmar, 2007). Ultimately, caste transcends mere labels, functioning as a deep-seated structure shaping identity, manifesting as a name, guarded secret, source of exclusion, or social capital providing emotional security and heritage within in-groups, yet compelling concealment to navigate discrimination (Pariyar, 2018).

Rationale of the Study

The study fills a significant gap in the existing research on the experiences of Dalits in Nepal, particularly the lack of focus on the daily identity experiences of Dalit youth in urban environments. Although the literature has explored structural disparities in education, employment, the legal framework, and rural caste relationships, fewer have focused on how urban Dalit youth perceive caste in their social interactions and personal relationships (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Specifically, little has been done regarding the emotional and relational aspects of caste in the context of educated Dalit youth in cities like Kathmandu. Other experiences like concealing identity, identity fatigue, and having pressure to be subtle in terms of discrimination in educational institutions, places of work, and peer groups are not well explored in the Nepali context.

Even though in the city, overt forms of discrimination might seem lower because of legal consciousness and social transformation, studies have indicated that

covert types of caste bias still influence choice of housing, job opportunities, and marital relationships (Bohara, 2025). Such experiences tend to foster what scholars refer to as conditional belonging, in which acceptance is contingent on whether caste identity is hidden or revealed (Folmar, 2019; Kharel, 2010).

Moreover, these experiences are overlooked in studies conducted through surveys, as subtle discrimination is often underreported due to stigma, fear of outing, or acceptance of daily prejudice. Consequently, research methods are required to document lived experiences and personal sense of caste identity.

To fill these gaps, this research employs narrative inquiry to examine how urban Dalit youth make sense of and negotiate their caste identity in their everyday lives. The research emphasizes the role of caste in shaping identity through microaggressions, identity negotiation, and resistance strategies (Bishwakarma, 2017; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

This study contributes to a broader understanding of caste as not merely a structural problem but also a daily social practice by integrating these lived experiences into scholarly discourse. By doing so, it also contradicts the belief that urban environments are devoid of caste stratification and underscores the importance of greater sensitivity to implicit discrimination (Pfaff-Czarnecki, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Even with constitutional provisions on equality and the legal abolition of untouchability, social life in Nepal, including in cities like Kathmandu, remains influenced by caste-based discrimination (Bohara, 2025; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Although the level of discrimination in urban areas might be lower than in rural settings, as research indicates, caste might be propagated through less noticeable mechanisms such as social exclusion, housing discrimination, and unequal treatment in education and employment (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

These covert types of discrimination usually affect the process of Dalit youths in finding an identity, relations, and belonging in their daily lives. In its turn, this causes numerous Dalit young adults to resort to hiding their caste status, changing their last names, or only revealing their caste background selectively to negotiate social space under the influence of ongoing caste bias (Folmar, 2019; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Even though caste inequality in Nepal is a topic that has been researched, little is known about the influence of caste on the lived experiences and identity negotiation

of Dalit youth in urban environments. Specifically, the study of subtle discrimination as experienced by the Dalit youth in their daily lives, coping with identity in daily relationships, and negotiating the emotional impact of conditional acceptance, is lacking.

Moreover, previous studies have given minimal attention to the role of caste and its intersection with other social factors, such as gender, inter-class mobility, and urban residence, in shaping the experiences of Dalit youth. Dalit women and upwardly mobile Dalit young people might experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization, yet few empirical studies examine how these intersectional forms shape day-to-day identity practices (Mohtey & Saikia, 2020).

These experiences are significant to understand since the urban space is supposed to be socially progressive and devoid of caste discrimination. Yet this assumption is challenged by the persistence of latent caste practices, which underscore the need for an empirical study that explores caste as a lived and changing social fact.

The research fills these gaps by analyzing how Dalit youth negotiate, co-create, and affirm their caste identity in their daily lives in Kathmandu city. This study aims to add to existing knowledge on how caste remains relevant to identity and belonging in modern Nepal by focusing on lived experiences.

Purpose of the Study

This research study aims to examine how the urban Kathmandu Dalit youth negotiate, experience, and assert their caste identity in their daily lives.

Research Question

1. What are some ways in which Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu narrate, negotiate, and assert their caste identity in day-to-day life?

Significance of the Study

This research is important because it adds to the body of knowledge, theoretical discourse, social knowledge, and policy discourse on caste and identity among Dalit youth in urban Nepal.

Academic Significance

Despite the extensive literature on caste in Nepal, much of it has focused on the rural setting, structural discrimination, and legal reforms (Subedi, 2011). There is little focus on the experiences of Dalit youth in urban settings, especially regarding identity negotiation and daily social relations.

This study will be valuable for filling gaps in the existing literature on Dalit youth in cities by emphasizing the lived experiences of urban residents rather than structural analysis, thereby providing a more nuanced view of how caste functions in daily life. Specifically, the study emphasizes the emotional aspects of caste, identity negotiation practices, and the daily manifestation of subtle discrimination (Folmar, 2019; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

Theoretical Significance

This research paper also contributes to theoretical debates by incorporating Social Identity Theory and Intersectionality into the discussion of how caste identity is developed and negotiated in urban space (Crenshaw, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The analysis of caste in relation to gender, class mobility, and urban life reveals that caste identity is not predetermined but is constantly constructed through social experiences and relations.

The study's focus also contributes to the field of narrative research by demonstrating that personal anecdotes can reveal the intricacies of identity formation among marginalized youth. Through narrative inquiry, this study shows how identity is constructed through experience, memory, and social interaction rather than being a fixed social category.

Social and Policy Significance

The social and policy implications of this study are also significant. The results show that Dalit youth are still victims of subtle caste discrimination in the fields of education, housing, employment, and social relations. These experiences prove that it is impossible to rely solely on legal changes to fight caste inequality without changing everyday social attitudes.

Through these lived experiences, the study offers insights that can be instrumental to educators, policymakers, and social organizations striving to achieve inclusiveness. These findings indicate that more people should be made aware of subtle caste discrimination, that educational practices should be more inclusive, and that efforts by institutions to combat everyday manifestations of exclusion are necessary (Folmar, 2019).

Personal Significance

The research is also personally relevant to me because it stems from my experience as a Dalit researcher. This positionality offered motivation and insights into the research process, as well as a better understanding of experiences such as

concealing identities, silence, and everyday resistance, which can be hard for an outsider researcher to fully understand (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Meanwhile, this insider posture demanded meticulous reflexivity to achieve analytical balance and moral accountability. Through personal experience and critical reflections, this study can be seen as helping to give a voice to Dalits in the scholarly discourse of caste and identity.

Limitations of the Study

Although this research provides detailed accounts of the lives of Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu, several shortcomings must be acknowledged.

To start with, being a qualitative narrative inquiry with four participants, the results are not expected to be statistically generalizable to the general Dalit population in Nepal. Instead, it is the strength of this method that provides detailed, situation-rich accounts of particular experiences. This study is, therefore, an analytical rather than a generalizing study.

Secondly, the research targets urban, educated Dalit youths, some of whom have fairly stable family backgrounds and have access to education opportunities. Consequently, they might have experiences different from those of Dalit youth from a less-privileged economic background or a village. Although this orientation provides us with rich insights into identity negotiation among upwardly mobile Dalit youth, it fails to reflect the richness of Dalit experiences.

Thirdly, the researcher's status as a member of the Dalit community conferred significant benefits, especially in building trust and promoting open dialogue. Simultaneously, such a privileged insider status also demanded thoughtful reflexivity to reduce the impact of personal assumptions on the research process. Critical reflection and ethical awareness were therefore addressed throughout the research.

Lastly, since the research is based on narratives, it depends on participants' interpretations of their experiences. This is what is expected of the narrative inquiry objectives, but it also implies that the results are subjective rather than objective measures of discrimination.

Despite such constraints, the research offers useful insights into the conditions of negotiating caste identity among Dalit youth in urban Nepal and also provides a basis for future research on the same issue.

Chapter Summary

The chapter started with an autobiographical account of how the study of caste became personal and relevant by establishing a structural system, and also an experience of life that defines identity and belonging. The chapter also described the rationale and problem statement, but lacked research on Dalit youth's experiences in urban settings. It further identified the research objective and the research question that informed the inquiry. In addition, the chapter addressed the academic, theoretical, social, and personal importance of the study, as well as the necessity of viewing caste as a social reality in its dynamic, changing forms.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews existing research on caste, identity, and urban life in Nepal, specifically focusing on Dalit youth in Kathmandu. It highlights how caste shapes daily urban experiences through subtle discrimination, identity management strategies, and significant psychological strain

Historical and Contemporary Contexts of Caste

The Caste in South Asia extends beyond social classification; it constitutes a deep-rooted system of knowledge. Aspects of power and governance continue to shape everyday life (Subedi, 2011). Carlsen and Waughray (2013) express “caste” as both symbolic and embodied power, organizing enduring social hierarchies and deeply influencing self-perception and interpersonal relations. Dalits in Nepal, historically considered “untouchables” or “Achhuts,” a community excluded from the classical Varna hierarchy and relegated to ritually impure occupations such as leatherwork, manual scavenging, sanitation, blacksmithing, and butchery (Bohara, 2025; Kharel, 2007).

In the Muluki Ain of 1854, promulgated under Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana, a rigid caste hierarchy was formalized across the newly unified kingdom, classifying diverse ethnic groups into five main categories: Tagadhari, Namasine Matwali, Masine Matwali, impure but touchable castes, and water-untouchable Achhuts. This had enforced hereditary occupations, inter-caste marriage restrictions, differential land ownership rights, privileges, obligations, and punishments based on caste status (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016; Subedi, 2011; Waughray, 2013).

The significant change in the legal system was the Constitution of Nepal 2015, which formally abolished untouchability and guaranteed the right against caste-based discrimination (Constituent Assembly Secretariat [CAS], 2015, Article 24). The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has guaranteed equal rights and mandated affirmative action for Dalits in education, employment, and health; entrenched social practices persist unabated (Bishwakarma, 2017; Mohtey & Saikia, 2020; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). However, the persistence of discrimination is evident in urban centers such as Kathmandu and Pokhara. Dalits encounter caste-based discrimination during the discourse of housing rentals, employment opportunities, marriage prospects, and

social interactions. Consequently, they often resort to "passing" by hiding surnames or backgrounds, even as overt untouchability declines amid migration, education, and economic diversification (Folmar, 2007; Neupane, 2017; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Legal and Policy Framework

Nepal's laws and policies have changed a lot. Caste-based discrimination is still a concern, and there is still a gap between the law and what happens in reality. The 2011 Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability Act, for instance, made many caste-based practices unlawful to bring Indian law into compliance with international human rights standards (Bohara, 2025; Mohtey & Saikia, 2020). The 2015 Constitution also specifies that Dalits have the same rights as everyone else and that schools, hospitals, and jobs must help them. This keeps them from being taken advantage of and left out (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). Caste-based discrimination is still a huge problem, even with this legislation. It happens in both obvious and less evident ways (Bohara, 2025; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Many Dalits living in cities are unable to access education, housing, medical care, or make friends (Folmar, 2007).

Empirical studies conducted in Kathmandu and Pokhara validate these trends, highlighting abuses of constitutional rights due to insufficient enforcement, eroded institutional trust, and public hesitance to address the matter (Bohara, 2025; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Over time and in secret, unequal systems produce structural violence. Some examples are school curricula that don't teach about Dalit history, landlords who won't rent to Dalits because of their caste, and institutions that only include Dalits in name and not in practice (Bishwakarma, 2017; Folmar, 2019).

This hidden bias, masked by promises of modernity, is also extremely obvious in real life. For example, Dalits may alter their surnames to evade humiliation (Folmar, 2007). Legal institutions recognize caste discrimination; yet, they often overlook the mechanisms of exclusion based on identification in quotidian urban life (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Also, Dalit youth have even fewer choices because the law isn't enforced well, there are gaps in the law, and they can't receive justice. They often lack the social capital or trust needed to get help (Folmar, 2019; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

In brief, this persistent gap between policy and practice reveals how caste still affects the daily, emotional, and social lives of Dalit youth in metropolitan Nepal as they struggle to find out who they are.

Identity Management Strategies: Passing, Concealment, and their Psychosocial Costs

Many people in cities like Pokhara and Kathmandu think of city life as a new beginning- modern, anonymous, and free from the constraints of the old countryside. But for young Dalits, it's not always easy. Caste is still a big part of life here. A lot of them have to hide who they really are very carefully so they can blend in or just get by. They call it "passing" or "de-Dalitisation" at times.

Changing or dropping their last name is one of the most typical things people do. In a survey conducted in metropolitan Pokhara, around 70% of Dalit respondents reported changing their last names to neutral ones, using sub-caste names, or choosing names that sound more like upper-caste names, such as Sharma or Ghimire, rather than names that immediately identify them as Dalit. Some people lie about their caste when questioned, stay away from talking about family traditions or village life, or don't say where they grew up. Some people even use different IDs for different contexts. For example, they might have one "safe" name for renting a room and another for business or pals.

Why go through all that trouble? Housing is a major deal. Landlords often discriminate without saying anything. When they hear a Dalit name, the apartment "isn't available anymore," or they make excuses. So, disguising your name is a way to stay alive, which is what some people term the "politics of anonymity." It could get you into a place, but it's tiring.

That constant acting is quite hard on you. These teens and young adults deal with this quiet anxiety every day: What if someone finds out? What if a simple question about family makes everything go wrong? It makes people anxious, makes it hard to trust others, and makes many people feel alone even when they are in a crowd. Researchers have found that people are more likely to be depressed and to suffer "identity fatigue," which is the tired feeling that comes from continually watching yourself, swallowing your pain, and never really resting. It's like having an invisible weight that makes you feel bad.

The numbers show this to be true. In regions like Lamjung district, surveys utilizing instruments like the Beck Depression and Anxiety Inventories indicated that Dalit girls and boys had considerably higher scores: girls had 15.4 for depression, and boys had 13.0 for anxiety. Patterns across the country show that Dalits are 2.5 times more likely to be depressed and up to 4 times more likely to be anxious than the

Bahun or Chhetri communities. In cities, small things build up: uncomfortable silences when caste comes up, little digs that look like jokes, or people suddenly pulling away when the truth comes out. It robs people of their dignity and leaves them feeling embarrassed, anxious, and broken, as if they will always have to conceal parts of themselves.

Even in moments that feel welcoming, maybe sharing a laugh or a meal, the fear lingers that one wrong word could end it. Belonging feels fragile, temporary. The city may promise freedom from caste, but it doesn't get rid of it; it merely makes it harder to hide and quieter, but still unpleasant.

These aren't just numbers or plans; they're real young people who have to choose between being honest and safe and having a roof over their heads. The emotional cost is immense, and it's a reminder that true inclusion means dismantling those invisible barriers, not just moving to a bigger town.

Conditional Belonging and the Delusion of Equality

Urban cities, such as Kathmandu, are often imagined as places where caste becomes less important, and ideals of modernity and meritocracy thrive. Nevertheless, studies consistently indicate that caste has taken less obvious forms, as younger Dalit generations must adopt de-Dalitisation tactics, such as changing their surnames or using sub-castes to remain anonymous, to bargain with systemic discrimination (Bohara, 2025; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Accordingly, this leads to conditional belonging, in which inclusion is conditional upon concealing Dalit identity; e.g., friendships, job opportunities, and housing opportunities tend to change radically on disclosure, with nearly 70% of Dalit youth in urban Pokhara changing identities mainly to be able to rent from the reluctant landlord (Bohara, 2025; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Furthermore, according to Bohora (2025), discriminatory behavior is seldom obvious, with it often being the form of silent rejection in the form of attempts to avoid background questions, invitations invoked with hesitation, or stepping out of relationships, as well as actions that make a person feel inferior in their housing and social interactions. To take the example of such terms as good family background or cultural fit, which hide discrimination in hiring, marriage, and informal communication, or hidden practices restrict access to resources in social environments despite less obvious bias (Peyton et al., 2024).

The city, despite opportunities for self-reinvention, requires silence and emotional work due to resentment by higher-caste groups over Dalit infiltration into closed labor markets and spaces (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019), making the promise of equality an illusion because it rewards conformity and punishes disclosure (Folmar, 2007). Eventually, this highlights the perennial influence of caste to define the social terrain in the alleged anonymity of contemporary cities.

Intersectional Marginalization of Dalit Youth

Caste itself is not the best way to understand the experience of Dalit youth in urban Nepal because their identities are a product of the interplay of factors such as gender, class, religion, language, region, age, and location in the city, resulting in their different levels of discrimination in cities such as Pokhara (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Specifically, by crossing the caste, ethnicity, and gender, Dalit girls experience the poorest mental health outcomes as their depression scores are twice those of high-caste boys (Folmar, 2019). In addition, discrimination exists in urban Kathmandu with gender, class, and ethnicity worsening the situation, and Dalit women and girls are subjected to various forms of oppression in learning and society (Kharel, 2010).

Relying on the concept of intersectionality, which is the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, the combination of identities, i.e., caste, gender, and class, has its own distinct discrimination that cannot be perceived individually (Mohtey & Saikia, 2020). Dalit young women experience a triple oppression of the patriarchy, casteism, and poverty in Kathmandu and other urban Nepali settings, and they are more vulnerable when it comes to being the most marginal group among Dalit groups (Shrestha & Siwakoti, 2025).

This intersectional strain manifests itself in approaches of extreme pressure to stay quiet and obedient, to suppress expression, leadership, and agency, so speaking out will lead to the threat of being dismissed as oversensitive, being quiet will result in passivity, conditional or symbolic inclusion, and limited participation (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). These processes are reflected in mental health inequalities, with Dalit girls reporting the greatest levels of depression and anxiety in the combination of stressors (Folmar, 2019).

Besides, there is another layer of complexity, which is economic class: even upwardly mobile Dalit youth with relatively stable backgrounds face resentment on the part of higher castes when entering previously closed social and labor spaces, which contributes to the development of the feeling of in-betweenness and alienation,

one of the educated Dalit young people remarked, Education is making me an outcaste within my own community. The dislike stems from Dalit success disrupting deeply rooted hierarchies and creating a backlash despite meritocratic ideals (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

In turn, they frequently use surnames or a pen name in schools and universities to fit in with the meritocratic standards and avoid being discriminated against, whereas this approach has been perceived as betrayal to the collective Dalit identity by certain of their peers but a survival strategy since older generations had to conceal their identities to gain admission to an engineering or medical school (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). The consequences of such concealment are burdensome on the psyche: identity fatigue, ethical issues, unrealized self-expression, or continuous emotional work of psychological torture (Folmar, 2019).

Resistance in Forms: Overt, Covert, and Digital

Resistance is expressed in the form of silent resistance, implicit resistance, identity reclaiming, and daily resistance- some of which are overt and direct, and some are covert and indirect (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). They tend to be in the form of hidden transcripts, including secret codes, jokes, stories, or conversations used by Dalit communities to criticize higher castes and power structures without the notice of dominant communities.

Storytelling, humor, and coded language are symbolic forms of resistance used by Dalit youth to break caste strict hierarchies in spite of the discrimination that they continue to face (Riessman, 2008). One such touching scenario was when a young Dalit woman recounted how she concealed her surname but was discovered anyway, and how she turned her powerlessness into potent assertions of dignity and agency (Folmar, 2007).

Online platforms, especially social media, provide crucial spaces to educated Dalit youth in metropolitan Nepal, creating "Dalit digital publics" - digital communities that offer cross-boundary networking, caste pride, and responses to casteless modernity (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). Such daring, imaginative storytelling aligns with the incomplete and uncertain revelations encountered in offline communication due to the risks involved. Furthermore, it also subjects young people to increased online harassment, trolling, and surveillance, which adds to the sense of vulnerability and rejection (Folmar, 2007; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

These resistance strategies cut across participants' multifaceted identities. As an example, Dalit women overcome compounded patriarchy and casteism through imposing agency in their relations and politics to resist gendered discrimination (Mohtey & Saikia, 2020). Likewise, youth in cities equipped with educational capital capitalize on the internet, jokes, and calculated self-promotion to shatter the illusion of fake inclusion and caste-neutrality (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). All these acts, in combination, address stratified marginalization that transforms individual plights into a common search for identity and fairness (Folmar, 2007).

Intersectionality also sheds some light on the policy and academic gaps in Nepal (Mohtey & Saikia, 2020). The majority of inclusion policies focus on Dalits as a unified population, disregarding the presence of internal hierarchies such as Bishwakarma claims of superiority over Sarki, Damai, and Pariyar, based on the ritual status, food consumption, occupational status, and taboos such as prohibition of commensality or entry into the house or handling of the corpse (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). This exclusion marginalizes even the most vulnerable groups, including Dalit women facing triple discrimination, which leads to a symbolic representation but not substantial (Mohtey & Saikia, 2020).

Such practices reinforce inequality and encourage people to suffer more emotionally to survive, making resistance to them more difficult; with a Dalit woman asserting her caste identity experiencing both gendered and caste-based ridicule at the same time (Folmar, 2007).

Finally, the identity of the Dalit youth in urban Nepal goes beyond the idea of caste. Intersectionality explains how caste, gender, and class intersect to shape experiences of exclusion, resistance, and resilience; to experience truly belonging, caste visibility, gender equity, and cultural affirmation are required to fully appreciate their lived experiences and strategies of adaptation.

Narrative Inquiry as Storytelling and Resistance

Narrative is not a method of experience telling but an essential pattern of meaning making, especially amidst silence, stigma, and exclusion (Bishwakarma, 2017). In particular, storytelling provides a vital platform to the youth of Kathmandu, who are Dalit, to engage with their resentment, protest, and redefine the connection with caste and experience the phenomena of discrimination through lived experiences (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). These stories are a conduit to unnamed pain, unexpressed

identities, and reclaimed lost dignity (Folmar, 2019). Therefore, narrative is a means of survival and strong resistance.

Based on this premise, Clandinin and Connelly (1990) state that individuals live and construct their lives based on stories that keep changing over time, place, and relationships. Stories turn into radical actions in caste-stratified societies, where the expression of any kind is discouraged. As an example, the Dalit literature, such as the autobiographies, acts politically by resisting erasure, subjectivity, dominant depictions, and establishing awareness of the casteist traditions. These personal stories challenge these illusions of neutrality and inclusion in urban spaces that present themselves as casteless (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Furthermore, the accounts of caste coming out of Dalit youth are usually cut-offs- hesitant, half-spoken, or coded- because they were afraid of humiliation, isolation, expulsion, trauma, or emotional burnout (Folmar, 2019). These tales exhibit the cost of emotions and maneuvering, such as metaphors, silence, and selective details, even in their incompleteness. They also show the contradictions of Kathmandu city: there is access to education and mobility, but caste exclusion and the need to conceal surnames (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Under conditions of visibility and safety, youth define belonging as a threat when it becomes unacceptable after caste is disclosed, and these groups find the right balance (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

Narrative inquiry acknowledges that narratives are the joint construction of relational spaces between participants and researchers (Webster & Mertova, 2007). As a Dalit woman researcher, I inform listening, interpretation, and representation through my lived experience. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) define subjectivity not as bias but as an understanding of time, personal-social, and place (Bishwakarma, 2017), which enables ethical and reflexive approaches.

In this case, narrative is information and a way of seeking meaning in caste and identity within the context of exclusion (Folmar, 2019), making room for ambiguity, contradiction, and hope. Finally, within the framework of forced silence, the act of telling stories retrieves the voice and establishes a counter-narrative to the casteless modernity.

Chapter Summary

The chapter examines existing literature on caste, identity, and city life among the Kathmandu Dalit youths. It discusses the history and laws of caste, emotional conflict, concealment or passing as an identity strategy, conditional belonging,

overlapping vulnerabilities, resistance (including digital activism), and storytelling as an important tool for understanding experiences. This puts the study in a position to fill gaps.

CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes how the study of the everyday life of Dalit youth in Kathmandu city was conducted. It adopts a narrative inquiry methodology within an interpretive-constructivist and critical paradigm, viewing identity and meaning as outcomes of stories and relationships. The philosophy of the study, the study design, the participants, data collection, data analysis, reflexivity, ethics, and the researcher's position are also discussed in the chapter.

Philosophical Orientation of my Study

This study is grounded in a qualitative approach, drawing on the interpretive-constructivist paradigm (Scotland, 2012) and the critical paradigm (Creswell, 2003; Dickie, 2018). These paradigms consider human experience as complex and co-constructed through language, memory, relationships, identities, histories, and social contexts.

Narrative inquiry is both the framework and the instructional philosophy (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It recognizes that reality is multiple, relational, and continually subject to interaction rather than fixed or objective. Narrative enquiry is especially suitable for investigating the caste issue among Dalit youth in Kathmandu, a world where life is dominated by exclusion, silence, risk, resistance, and emotion (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). It goes beyond observations to feelings, memories, hesitations, and decisions, like the concealment of surnames in casteless urban areas. In this perspective, participants become co-creators of the meaning as partners, highlighting the co-construction of the meaning in narrative research.

Ontological Assumptions

Ontology deals with the existence and the knowledge about what exists. The research uses a relativist ontology, which understands reality as multi- and subjectively determined by people's lived experiences, their relationships, language, and social contexts (Baden & Niekerk, 2007; Bishwakarma, 2017).

To Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu, reality is encountered in mundane ways: nervousness when disclosing a surname, awkwardness with anonymity in academic institutions or the workplace, and relief when discussing with close peers. Caste, thus,

is not a fixed label but a mobile presence lived through exclusion, strategic silence, and resistance in a casteless modernity (Folmar, 2019).

Narrative ontology is also employed in the study, which holds that individuals interpret their lives through narratives. In this perspective, identity is not set in stone, but it undergoes development through narration. The importance of this narrative lens in the study of caste is that Dalits in urban Nepal often bargain under the radar through strategic concealment, anonymity, and daily discrimination in neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology is the philosophy that covers the essence of knowledge, its creation, interpretation, and confirmation (Bishwakarma, 2017). The epistemology of constructivism and relations (Baden & Niekerk, 2007) is employed in this research, as knowledge is created through constant dialogue, interaction, and relations between the researcher and participants. Narrative inquiry highlights the relational roles that construct stories in the process of dynamism within social settings, rather than presenting definite stories (Daiute, 2013; Dickie, 2018).

To Dalit youth who must negotiate caste in silence and exclusion, this co-construction from the insider positionality of a researcher provides a deeper understanding of subjective experiences, such as strategic concealment (Bishwakarma, 2017; Dickie, 2018). My caste background as a Dalit researcher makes me listen to participants' stories differently, interpret them in different ways, and represent them differently.

I consider this positionality an advantage rather than a bias, providing a distinct understanding of subtle exclusion and resistance (Berger, 2013). As demonstrated by (Daiute, 2013), narratives of the narrative research are subject and process: they vary with circumstances, feeling, and viewers, making knowledge dynamic and interactive (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

In this perspective, storytelling is an effective means of knowledge-making and agency (Webster & Mertova, 2007), enabling participants to tell stories, oppose silence, and rediscover identities. I thus consider such stories as rich, legitimate knowledge, full of emotion, history, and social context, and place myself as a co-creator in the process (Dickie, 2018).

Axiological Position

Axiology refers to values, ethics, and beliefs that influence research practices and findings (Pretorius, 2024). In qualitative research, particularly the interpretive-constructivist and critical paradigms (in particular, narrative inquiry), the values of the researchers influence the process and the formation of meaning rather than being considered biases (Bishwakarma, 2017).

This work thus incorporates an emancipatory axiology that aligns with the social-justice orientation of the critical paradigm. It aims to enhance dignity, visibility, empowerment, and change for marginalized groups (Creswell, 2003; Scotland, 2012). Being a Dalit researcher, since my personal experience of caste-based silence and resistance, I am more sensitive to the slightest forms of exclusion. This enables me to identify caste relationships that a stranger would not. Similarly, participants engage in collaborative storytelling and co-production of meaning (Dickie, 2018).

There is also an ethical and political side to narrative inquiry. It lets Dalit participants present their narratives in their true colors, even amid silencing and stereotyping, and reinstates their agency, voice, and recognition (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It is on this basis that relational ethics, which emphasizes care, respect, and attention to vulnerabilities, including shame, exclusion, and the concealment of identity in the event of disclosure, informs the study (Spencer et al., 2014).

Research Paradigm

The paradigms applied in the study include interpretive-constructivist and critical paradigms, both of which are related and compatible with a relativist ontology, a constructivist-relational epistemology, and an emancipatory axiology (Bishwakarma, 2017). United, they both offer subtle information about the lived conditions of the Dalit youth under structural caste discrimination (Scotland, 2012).

The interpretive-constructivist paradigm sees reality as diverse and constructed by people through their interactions, memories, contexts, and languages (Baden & Niekerk, 2007; Scotland, 2012). Knowledge is a relationally constructed phenomenon whose construction occurs between the researcher and other participants (Dickie, 2018). As a Dalit woman researcher, I also offer an insider perspective, which makes me more sensitive to these dynamics. This enables me to work very closely and unpack how caste identities are being practiced in the so-called casteless modernity of urban Kathmandu, where hidden surnames, anonymity at school, and

subtle marginality are evident, provoking doubts, resistances, and a daily way of making meaning (Daiute, 2013; Khatiwada, 2022).

On the other hand, the critical paradigm explores the root causes, including power relations, history, and structural inequalities (Scotland, 2012). It approaches reality as historical realism, which is politically, culturally, and ideologically conditioned, and strives to achieve emancipation by fighting oppression and promoting social justice (Scotland, 2012). By law, caste continues to be a social structure in the urban lives of Dalit youth, at colleges, in the workplace, and even in NGOs (Bohara, 2025).

The interpretive lens can be used to show the personal voices and agency by combining these paradigms, whereas the critical lens can reveal the systemic oppression. They both contribute to transformations in dialogue on caste, identity, and equity, through stories as instruments of resistance and transformation (Scotland, 2012).

Research Area: Kathmandu Valley as the Urban Location of Caste

My study is located in Kathmandu Valley, a fast-urbanizing area that blends modernity, anonymity, and hierarchies. Kathmandu is regarded as the most liberal city in Nepal, with universities, NGOs, and new digital platforms that offer opportunities for young people. However, my personal life, as well as the literature, demonstrates that caste, despite being usually kept secret, still continues to influence interpersonal relationships, institutional contexts, and personal identity (Bohara, 2025; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Due to this combination, the city is a perfect place to examine how Dalit youth, particularly educated, mobile, and digitally savvy youth, manage their identities in the tensions of modernity. Kathmandu is a place where reinvention is possible but also demands conformity; hence, it is an important site for exploring how caste works through daily interactions, decisions, silences, and revelations.

Purposeful, Ethical, and Relational Participant Selection

I selected participants through purposive sampling, which is suitable for narrative inquiry and enables me to address information-rich cases rather than seeking a representative one. All respondents identified themselves as Dalit, were 20-30 years old, were raised in the valley, and were educated young people working in universities, corporate companies, NGOs, or civic initiatives. Some were engaged in advocacy, writing, art, or digital activism, where the definition is both personal and

political. Their narratives of agency, resilience, contradiction, and self-awareness suited this work, but not to represent them as passive victims (Dickie, 2018).

I found the majority of them through personal networks, academic and activist groups, and snowball sampling, which helps reach hard-to-reach marginalized populations and build trust (Kharel, 2010). Being a Dalit young researcher, my own lived experience network provided an ethically powerful force, enhanced closeness and sensitivity to disclosures, and became a methodological resource for ethical, relational recruitment (Dickie, 2018).

Methods of Information Collection

The research was grounded in narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006) to examine Dalit youth's experiences and identity negotiation in Kathmandu. Narrative inquiry also considers individuals to be narrators of lived lives, and does not consider data as facts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). By doing so, it allowed participants' narratives to be co-created, influenced by memory, emotion, silence, and relationships, and for their subjectivity to be heard while giving voice to the marginalized (Daiute, 2013).

In-depth Interviews

The primary data collection tool was unstructured in-depth interviews, conducted as open-ended conversations at the core of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006). Participants presented their stories in their own words, beginning with childhood recollections and moving to their thoughts on caste, education, family, urban life, and identity (Webster & Mertova, 2007). These meetings were relational meaning-making meetings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Due to the shared social and emotional touchpoints as a Dalit researcher, I was trusted and opened up, as we were at the same level of relational proximity and insider positionality (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Maurya, 2018).

The conversations were facilitated by prompts but focused on participants' memories and emotions, allowing for emotional depth, silence, and contradiction (Dickie, 2018). Hesitations, changes of tone, or even metaphors were sometimes used to provide insight into the story being told, and this could carry significant narrative value (Savin -Baden & Niekerk, 2007). This considers stories as experiences that were lived in time, place, and sociality (Clandinin, 2006).

Field Notes and Researcher Reflexivity

I maintained field notes throughout the research process. They documented the participants' situation, behaviors, and emotional expressions, as well as the informal

pre- and post-interview discussions, my thoughts, interpretations, and emotional reactions as a researcher (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). This is a reflexive practice at the core of narrative inquiry, which allowed me to reflect on how my positionality as a Dalit woman researcher influenced data collection and the depth and direction of participants' narratives (Greene, 2014; Maurya, 2018).

The tones were captured through reflections, such as participants being too afraid of stigma to speak out, and Dalits sometimes even though this was reflected in the silence (Shah & Lashari, 2023). Even simple conversations turned into disclosures following some initial uncomfortable lapses (Baden & Niekerk, 2007). In general, field notes obtained immediately after the interview helped in reflexivity and enhanced the understanding of narrative contexts, emotional subtleties, relational forces, and collaborative meaning-making (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Observation

I conducted limited but purposeful observations (Clandinin et al., 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to better understand participants' everyday environments, including their homes, workplaces, and community settings (Kharel, 2010). For instance, these spaces often revealed how caste was either hidden or openly discussed in daily life (Kharel, 2010)

Ultimately, this approach aligns with narrative inquiry's three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2006), which emphasizes how stories are always connected to lived experiences in specific contexts, relationships, and time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)

Meaning Making and Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry, analysis is a continuous, recursive process that goes through the research. It begins with writing field texts and goes on with writing interim texts. It is aimed at not dissecting lived experiences but at thinking narratively across time, social relationships, and place (Clandinin et al., 2006). Researchers and participants jointly construct stories and are influenced by the course of time, relationships, and settings (Dickie, 2018).

I applied a narrative thematic angle to the analysis of these co-created narratives. I investigated how Dalit youth construct and negotiate their identities within the caste relations (Dickie, 2018). The approach of reading transcripts as wholes led to the identification of themes, patterns, tensions, contradictions, and silences, while retaining the wholeness and uniqueness of each story. It uncovered

common themes in stories without dividing them into separate codes and emphasized the role of participants' identities in caste discrimination, educational ambitions, urban migration, and perseverance (Mukherjee et al., 2024).

Transcribing Data and Organizing Data

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim with the participants' consent as part of the core field text. I added these written records, along with field notes on context, nonverbal expressions, emotional displays, and self-reflective interpretation (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

I used the principles of narrative inquiry to read the integrated texts several times. This immersed me in the participants' stories and uncovered recurring themes, repeated phrases, emotional resonances, metaphors, silences, hesitations, and contradictions that hinted at deeper meaning (Daiute, 2013). I also mixed my journal thoughts during the process. Those thoughts revealed how my Dalit identity influenced common narratives and maintained the writing's moral and established good relations (Clandinin et al., 2006; Maurya, 2018).

Coding and Interpretation

I adhered to the coding strategies proposed by Saldaña (2025). First, I used the initial elements in descriptive coding. Then I proceeded to pattern and thematic coding to develop expanded themes in the stories. The codes yielded repetitive patterns of Dalit identity formation, integrating caste stigma, aspirations, struggles, and resistance, without losing narrative coherence or uniqueness. I did not use separate fragments (Daiute, 2013; Riessman, 2008). The recursive approach paid special attention to the entire story arc of each participant, including temporality of past experiences, present challenges, and future expectations that constitute identities, sociality, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mukherjee et al., 2024).

Quality Standards

To secure credibility, I used quality criteria that extend beyond scientific testing. These norms focused on realistic, natural narratives that can be close to participants' lived experience, value full stories, foster nurturing relationships, and reflect individuals fairly (Loh, 2015; Webster & Mertova, 2007). I provided space for participants to develop their narratives in their own words in long-term, trust-building discussions that recognized the co-construction of our relational processes (Baden & Niekerk, 2007).

My positionality, interpretations, emotional responses, and possible biases were monitored through a continuous reflexive journal, which increased openness and clarity (Wei, 2023). The three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry, comprising temporality, sociality, and place, informed the study and guided data collection, analysis, and interpretation toward lived transitions, relational context, and situated experiences (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Temporality

In narrative inquiry, the past, present, and future of people, places, events, and identities are captured through temporality or the attention paid to events that occur in time as layered and interconnected stories (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2006). It demonstrates how childhood experiences influence current perceptions, how current struggles shape future ambitions, and how future aspirations fuel present behaviors. These ongoing narratives allow researchers to track turning points, continuities, and changes in identity over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The temporal lens used in this paper showed how Dalit young people in Kathmandu bargain with caste identities through the lenses of childhood experiences of microaggressions, adolescent school-related stigma, and dreams, and an adulthood vision of mobility and activism (Mukherjee et al., 2024; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). It emphasized moments of transition, the discovery of inferiority, endurance, and redefinition, and how participants' sense of Dalit identity changed in response to contextual shifts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Sociality

Sociality in narrative inquiry emphasizes that human experience is both social and relational. The identity, stories, and meanings are created through family, community, institutional, and societal interactions. Power relations determine which stories get heard and which remain unheard (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The research revealed negotiations of caste identities among Dalit young people within the family, peer, and societal contexts (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). These relations encouraged hiding or assisting, and they became places of contradiction and conditional acceptance. In this way, caste becomes not an individual burden but a dynamic factor in their social worlds.

Place

Place is a particular physical situation or a chain of places in which the inquiry and events occur (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Places are not passive frames but

become the experiences they have because of intrinsic meanings, physical aspects, social interactions, and impacts on identity, relationships, and power (Clandinin et al., 2006).

Places in this study include schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces. It shaped Dalit youths' experiences regarding caste stigma, educational aspirations, urban mobility, and strength (Mukherjee et al., 2024). Participants explained how particular places -such as elite colleges that made them feel inferior or urban employment that made them feel confident despite being excluded- affected their social acceptance, opportunities, and self-esteem

Finally, attending to place enriched the analysis, portraying identities as dynamic negotiations within urban landscapes of opportunity and constraint while preserving narrative wholeness (Clandinin et al., 2006).

Ethical Considerations

In narrative inquiry, particularly among vulnerable populations that experience caste stigma, ethics are not merely a matter of procedural adherence. They are the relational responsibilities that are negotiated during the research process (Chataika, 2005). Prior to each interview, I described the study's objective, obtained informed consent verbally, and assured participants that they could withdraw at any time without consequences (Peyton et al., 2024). I ensured participants' privacy by assigning pseudonyms and maintaining strict confidentiality.

Another matter I managed to achieve through long discussions was the development of respectful, trusting relationships. These discourses recognized the co-constructed and power dynamics (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In situations where participants told emotionally difficult stories of caste-based exclusion, I chose to act as a co-narrator and active partner, respecting their storytelling rather than treating them as passive participants (Dickie, 2018).

Also, I maintained a reflexive journal that documented my Dalit positionality, interpretations, emotional reactions, prejudices, and how these affected the inquiry. The practice facilitated transparency, self-awareness, and rigor (Clandinin et al., 2006).

At the end of it all, these practices were not restricted to rules. These were an ethic of care, constant responsibility, and a loyal and dignified representation of the participants' lives, which maintain narrative authority and integrity (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the approach of narrative inquiry, which is influenced by the interpretive and critical approaches. It described participant selection, data collection through interviews, observations, and field notes, and analysis through codification and storytelling. The focus was on the moral, interpersonal co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants.

CHAPTER IV
CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF CASTE
CONSCIOUSNESS

This chapter goes to the core of this narrative inquiry by offering the voices of the four Dalit youth- Abhisha, Avash, Sita, and Meena as they tell of their childhood memories and how their caste consciousness slowly, or sometimes, abruptly, emerged in urban Kathmandu. Both stories, full of personal experiences and emotional nuances, are the main sources of this research and thus provide an insight into how caste permeates and influences the self-perception and social relationships of young Dalits. This chapter does not attempt to generalize about Dalit childhood; rather, it offers a close observation of the numerous ways in which caste is made a reality.

Abhisha Sijapati: I Suddenly Felt Inferior

I first met Abhisha in 2018, when we worked together in Kathmandu with an organization led by Dalit women. Over the four years we were in the same workspace, I could see how she slowly transformed from being confused about her caste to someone who began to doubt and challenge it. Nevertheless, this change did not start in the workplace. It was based on previous experiences in her life that were at first ambiguous and disjointed but came to play a major role in helping her form her opinions on caste.

Abhisha was born in 2000 and spent her life in Dallu, Kathmandu, where she lived with her parents and younger brother. She attended basic education in Kanchanjanga School, which was approximately ten minutes away, and later joined Uday Bal Batika to continue her higher grades.

She characterized her childhood as normal and happy. She said, *“I spent a lot of my time in school, playing with my friends in the neighborhood, and visiting my cousins.”* Their neighborhood was intimate, and the children were used to moving freely between their houses. Caste, in this context, was not a topic of discussion.

Abhisha also recalled that she loved to dance, and her peers often admired her talent. She excelled in her studies and was considered a disciplined student. Throughout this time, her surname, Sijapati, never aroused interest or enquiry amongst teachers or classmates. She added that, *“Everybody believed I was Chhetri. Even I thought I was Chhetri.”*

Caste was not discussed at home. Her family never talked openly about their background, and Abhisha spent her childhood coming to terms with the identity she had taken without questioning it. Consequently, her childhood experiences had little to do with caste.

First Doubt and Family Silence

It was in Grade 8 that Abhisha started to recognize her identity differently. At school, she met a boy, Avash Gautam Sunar, whom she called a distant relative brother since her family was familiar with his family. Avash was the first to identify himself as Dalit, unlike Abhisha. She said that, *“This posed a disturbing question in my head. How could they be related if Avash was Dalit?”*

She did not ask about it immediately, but the question remained with her. At some point, she talked to her parents about it. She was not given a clear explanation, but met silence. They rejected it, but she did not know why. They did not want to discuss it. She said, *“I was too young to press further. The discussion ended without clarification, though the doubt remained.”*

Delays in Awareness and College Years

In 2013, after completing her School Leaving Certificate (SLC), Abhisha entered Banglamukhi College to pursue higher secondary education. She continued to excel academically and was among the best students in her class.

Throughout this period, the discussion with friends was largely about the usual aspects of college life, such as classes, teachers, and friends. Even though caste discrimination and untouchability were the topics of textbooks and classroom sessions, her daily social life did not revolve around them. She said, *“These lessons, at times, reminded me of the doubts I had in Grade 8. But I made no further inquiry. Because of this, caste remained alien to me.”*

The Feeling of Inferiority and Disclosure at Home

Abhisha realized her caste identity more clearly after volunteering with a Dalit women-led organization during her +2 studies. It is through this work that she came across stories of discrimination against the Dalit women, especially in the rural setting. These were in marked contrast to her comparatively protected life.

During the same period, she learned that the founder of the organization, her own aunt, had been a victim of extreme caste discrimination in the past. This was a huge eye-opener for her, since such experiences had never been discussed in her family.

Curiosity and disturbance made Abhisha go home and directly question her mother whether they belonged to the Dalit family. She recalled, *“I came home that day, “I didn’t even remove my bag. The first question I asked my mother was, Are we Dalit?”*

Her mother responded with shock, and she immediately told her to lower her voice in case other neighbors could hear. She then reluctantly admitted that they were of the caste, but warned Abhisha not to tell anybody, even her own father and younger brother. This scene really affected Abhisha. She said that, *“I had always been introducing myself as Chhetri. I felt inferior when my mother told me not to tell anyone.”*

This was the first moment Abhisha felt a sense of tension between the identity she grew up with and the one she had just discovered. She was not sure, but felt uneasy about it being a secret.

Experience of Caste in Our Daily life: The Home of Bhawana

Although Abhisha realized her caste identity, she did not publicly reveal it to her friends. She had never experienced direct discrimination herself, but she started to feel that maybe, after coming out, people would treat her differently.

She made new friends during her undergraduate studies in Social Work at Kailash Uday Academy, but caste never took center stage. There was one incident during this period that left a mark on her.

She remembered going to her friend Bhawana’s house in Thebe, Lalitpur. The neighborhood was quiet and almost rural, even though it was close to Kathmandu. Abhisha had just bathed her hair and was sitting in the warm sun on a winter afternoon when the mother of Bhawana asked her to go into the kitchen and have a cup of fresh milk.

Initially, the discussion was informal and pleasant. But everything shifted at once when Bhawana spoke about her brother's romantic relationship. Her mother was very critical of the girl.

She told us the girl was of a lower caste, *Achhut*, said Abhisha. She declared that had she known earlier, she would never have welcomed her into the house or the kitchen. Abhisha felt very uncomfortable listening to these remarks. She explained, *“I was jittery all through my body.”* She also said, *“I tried to suggest that caste should not be used to judge people, but her remarks were disregarded. Instead, she did not disclose her identity and walked away silently out of the house.”* Looking back at the

incident, she stated that the incident changed her relationship with Bhawana. *We are not so close as we used to be. Something in me died that day,*” she added.

Disclosure within an Intimate Relationship

In her later years of her bachelor's degree, Abhisha became romantically involved with a man named Nishan Kunwar. This is when her experiences and her work with the Dalit organization, including the incident at Bhawana's house, made her more conscious of the importance of recognizing her identity. Nevertheless, it was hard to disclose it.

She talked to me about her issues and thus decided to be honest with Nishan. She wrote him telling him how she was a Dalit. She said, *“I was weeping when I typed the message. My hands were shaking.”*

Nishan reacted in support and assured her that her caste was not an issue with him. He even told his parents about the relationship, and at first, they accepted it. This reaction was a relief to her, but a subsequent event led her to wonder about the sincerity of that acceptance.

Conditional Acceptance: Ward Office Incident

One day, Abhisha went with Nishan and his parents to a ward office on some official work. During the visit, one of the ward members casually inquired about her name and her relationship with Nishan.

The official inquired of her whether she was Newar when she introduced herself as Abhisha Sijapati. She was about to answer when Nishan's mother hastily intervened, telling *“She is Chhetri.”*

This situation was embarrassing. Seeing that Abhisha was not comfortable, Nishan explained that she was not a Chhetri and that the name Sijapati could also be a surname of the Dalit community.

His mother seemed surprised, and the tension escalated. Looking back, Abhisha began to doubt the promises she had been given. She remarked, *“And I began to think about whether they had actually accepted me as I am.”*

In the case of Abhisha, the experience highlighted the importance of caste in shaping other aspects of her identity. Despite her success in school and in her profession, she was aware that people would sometimes classify her in a single category.

Her narrative, in particular, depicts how the formerly unquestioned identity has been slowly transformed into a complex process of negotiation, conditioned by family silence, social interaction, and intimate relationships.

Avash Gautam Sunar: It was Never the Problem to be Open.

Another participant in this study who introduced me to Avash is Abhisha. The contrast between their experiences was what caught the eye at a glance. Even though Abhisha spent most of her childhood without being mindful that she was a Dalit, Avash had never been secretive about his caste status. Their varied experiences show how Dalit youths can approach caste differently, though in the same urban settings.

Childhood, Exceptional Understanding, and Early Migration

Avash was born in the year 1999 in Arghakhanchi. When he was two, he relocated with his mother to Kathmandu to join his father, who had already migrated to work and study. He was brought up in Kirtipur, a semi-urban place he recalled as open fields that had been slowly covered with houses and roads.

He had a peaceful childhood, marked by outdoor games and friendships. He attended a local school, then Udaya Bal Batika to continue his studies.

Caste was never concealed from him, unlike some of the other participants. Since he was a child, he has been aware that he is part of the Dalit community. This realization was mostly brought about by his father, who was also an active Dalit activist and used to share his personal stories of discrimination.

These discussions enabled Avash to formulate a concept of caste not on the basis of his personal experiences of exclusion but as a matter of family memory and political consciousness. He said, *“I never underwent the same discrimination my father experienced, but I was never unaware of my origin.”*

Life in School and Surname Visibility

Avash said that his school life was generally positive. He excelled academically, was active in extracurricular activities, and even became the House Captain. He also had no memory of being discriminately targeted due to his caste when in school.

But caste was more evident in Grade 8, when his real name, Avash Gautam Sunar, was registered for the examination. So far, he was primarily referred to as Avash Gautam, which was not a clear indication of his caste origin.

“People thought I was Chhetri,” he recalled. His caste was officially recognized by the addition of the word Sunar. Nonetheless, Avash never thought of concealing his surname. Rather, he kept on using it publicly.

In his case, the surname was not a bad choice. He thought that doing so would equate to accepting the system that stigmatized Dalit identities. He also added that, *“It is nothing to run or hide away from.”*

Dalit History Learning Outside of the Family

Even though Avash learned about caste through his father's experiences, it was the other exposures that helped him better understand the emotion of caste. A major experience was when he attended a theatre show on Dalit experiences at Pragya Pratisthan at about 12 years old. The play made a strong impression on him.

He said *“That was the first time I ever felt what our community had experienced. I could not forget the humiliation and injustice.”* Even though he had never gone through such harsh discrimination personally, the performance made him identify with the collective history of Dalit struggles on a personal level. Caste became not only a social grouping, but also, through this experience, a collective historical memory.

Everyday Caste Conversations

Though he was not secretive about his identity, Avash acknowledged that this did not imply that he was not uncomfortable. On some occasions, subtle caste attitudes were shown in informal chats.

For example, he recalled being advised by a close friend to abandon his surname, Sunar, and use only the name, Avash Gautam. His friend claimed that this would save his future children from discrimination.

Even though the implication was made to sound like concern, it bothered him. He recalled that, *“It taught me that even educated individuals still believe that it is better to conceal caste.”*

Avash was convinced that the issue was not the surnames but the social attitudes. In his view, *“The real change would not be avoiding caste thinking but confronting it.”* He even remembered when caste was carelessly mentioned during social conversations. During a wedding, he overheard a friend asking another person why he was dressed like a Damai or a Kami. Though the comment was not made to him, it unsettled him. *“I did not know what to do. It was spoken casually, yet it was wrong,”* he said.

It was moments like these that made him aware that acceptance was not necessarily a lack of caste prejudice.

Breaking her Heart and the Boundaries of Tolerance

At the time of my interview with Avash in August 2022, he was finishing his engineering degree and also grappling with the emotional effects of a recent breakup. He had spent the last two years in a relationship with a lady from a Chhetri family, meeting her through mutual friends.

At first, he presented himself only by his name, Avash Gautam. She inquired about his surname later, after she heard his full name. He was not afraid to discuss his caste background. She replied by saying that it did not matter to her, and they went on with the relationship.

She went to his house, where she became on good terms with his family. But Avash never saw her parents. Her family eventually found out about the relationship on social media and strongly disapproved of it.

Pressure in the family got worse, and this time, the mother of the girl is said to have threatened to harm herself if the relationship continued. The couple felt the pressure and thus separated. He said that, *“It was not a conflict that led us to break up, he added. We broke up because of caste.”*

They continued to communicate with each other occasionally after the breakup, although Avash said he felt emotionally numb. First, he did not share the experience with his parents and concentrated on his studies.

When he did open up, they were sympathetic and advised him to view the experience as a learning opportunity rather than a failure.

The reflection on the relationship led Avash to ask himself whether the outcome would have been different had he been in another caste? He also indicated that his parents subsequently advised him that he could prevent such pain in the future by getting married within the community. *“I believe that it would prove easier,”* he reflected.

Caste Among Dalit Communities

Another point Avash made was that caste hierarchies were not limited to non-Dalits and Dalits. He gave an example from his extended family of a situation in which his cousin's relationship with a woman from the Sarki community was not accepted by family members.

His grandmother greatly opposed the relationship and emotionally pressured his cousin to stop it. Although both of them were educated and financially stable, the relationship broke up because of the caste disparity within the Dalit community. He

said in a sad tone that, *“Both of them, were educated and working. But none of that mattered.”*

This experience helped Avash realize that caste-based separation can persist even among marginalized populations. He also explained how fear affected family attitudes towards the inter-caste relationships. His grandmother, on the one hand, was concerned about his safety after the very popular cases of caste-based violence like the Rukum incident. He thought her fears influenced her more than prejudice.

The story of Avash reveals how Dalit identity and early recognition and identification with the identity can bring out a powerful sense of self. Meanwhile, his experiences also show that openness is not the sole factor in reducing the emotional cost of caste, especially in intimate relationships and social belonging.

Sita Rijal: I Learned Early, but I Learned to be Careful

Sita was referred to me by Abhisha, her cousin and a participant in this study. They lived in different environments despite having similar urban backgrounds and family environments, and their experiences with caste awareness were very different. Unlike Abhisha, who did not discover her caste identity until she was older, Sita was raised knowing that she was a Dalit. But her story demonstrates that early awareness does not always lead to confidence; on the contrary, it may lead to caution.

Sita was born in 1997 in Kathmandu and studied in Wilson Academy and then joined Gyankunj Higher Secondary School. Her surname, Rijal, often led people to think she was of a higher caste. She, nonetheless, never rejected her Dalit identity when she was still attending school.

Caste Awareness at an Early Age

Sita did not have the moment of revelation about her caste that some other participants did. She was raised with the understanding that her family was the Sunar community. Caste was not often discussed at home, but it was not concealed.

This meant that caste was initially normal to her rather than something to be afraid of or ashamed of. She also grew up in an urban setting, where she formed friendships and connections with other people of various backgrounds, and caste did not necessarily appear to be an obstacle in her everyday experiences.

This early realization enabled her to grow into a comfortable sense of identity in childhood. At this level, it did not seem like Dalit was something to be hiding.

Openness in School

Sita brought this openness into the school life. She remembered that *“In a Social Studies discussion, she had raised her hand and said she was a Dalit. Her peers were not opposed to it, and she was not directly discriminated against.”*

She excelled academically and was a good student who actively participated in classroom activities. She believed that her talent was appreciated on merit, not on caste. Her surname gave her a chance to be considered upper caste, but she did not deliberately capitalize on it at the time. This was a time of relative self-confidence before she started to feel caste as a possible threat.

Institutional Humiliation: A Reflection

This marked a major turning point in Grade 10, when Sita won a school debate competition. Although she had started to be proud of her accomplishment, a remark from one of her teachers made her see her identity differently. She shared, *“The teacher added that she was bright despite her lower caste. Even though the remark was meant as praise, it implied that her success was surprising given her caste background.”*

She was deeply affected by this experience. She added, *“I came to understand that her achievements were being viewed through the prism of caste instead of merit alone.”* Since the comment was made by a teacher, it had institutional weight, and the experience was even more effective.

This event prompted Sita to reflect on the dangers of openly identifying as Dalit. She said, *“I learned that discrimination might not always be overt in the form of direct exclusion, but rather in apparently positive remarks that served to solidify the hierarchy.”*

Learning to Be Selective with Disclosure

After this experience, Sita became more cautious about revealing her caste identity. She said that, *“When I joined college later, I did not actively disclose my background and left people to assume I was of a higher caste because of my surname.”*

This choice was not to deny her identity but to save herself against potential humiliation. She said that, *“I was more careful about who I shared this information with. My close friends knew about my background, but I would keep to myself in broader social circles.”*

As much as this strategy offered a sense of safety, it also led to emotional tension. She also said that, *“I knew that I even received respect with assumptions regarding my caste, and this led me to consider the way privilege functions using social perceptions.”* Silence came to be learnt as a strategy, and not as a denial of identity.

Discrimination in housing: Caste as material Reality

The issue of caste was particularly evident in Sita's life due to discrimination in house rent. She said that, *“While my family tried to rent a house in Kathmandu, the landlords rejected them when they learned of their caste origin.”*

This experience made her realize that caste discrimination does not only apply when interacting with other people, but it can also interfere with access to fundamental necessities, including shelter.

She said, *“After this experience, my family urged me not to expose my caste unnecessarily so that she would not be further excluded.”* She felt that even though this piece of advice was to protect her, it strengthened her developing belief that, at times, one needed to remain silent to survive.

Overhearing a Caste Conversation When Anonymous

The more Sita managed to pass as upper caste in educational and social situations, the more such situations she ended up in when people discussed Dalits freely without ever knowing her background. She remembered, *“I heard remarks that called Dalits inferior or visibly different. Such comments were usually made in the form of jokes or passing remarks, rather than direct insults. But they were especially troubling since they were normalized.”*

A particularly challenging experience was hearing negative remarks about one of my Dalit colleagues. Since she had disguised her own identity, the other people felt free to express their prejudiced opinions around her.

“When this happened, I became emotionally confused. It would have taken courage to speak up, and to remain silent was a personal concern.” This is what allowed her to realize that caste prejudice is frequently driven by an assumption about the presence of people in a discussion. The protection spared her the actual discrimination but exposed her to scenarios where she was a silent witness to discrimination.

Learned Caution and Living with Early Awareness

In retrospect, Sita realized that her caste identity, which she had known since childhood, did not always give her confidence and security. Rather, she learned, over time, when she felt safe to be open and when she felt the need to remain silent.

The comment of the teacher, housing discrimination, and daily caste talk were some of the experiences that influenced her perception about belonging and threat. With time, she learned to strike a balance between pride in who she was and how she approached disclosure.

Her narrative demonstrates that one is not necessarily empowered when they become aware of caste early in life. Rather, it might give rise to a complicated process of learning to navigate the social environments in which one may not be sure of acceptance.

Meena Gurung: Until I Disclosed, People Would Not Know

Meena was introduced to me by a common friend. The first thing that became apparent during our interaction was the mismatch between her surname and her caste identity. Despite being referred to as Meena Gurung in most social circles, she came out as a member of the Dalit community. This contrast between her societal image and her inner world influenced most of her caste experience.

Meena was employed at an eye hospital in Kathmandu when we held our interview, and she was also engaged in social service with the Lions Club. We were introduced at a restaurant in Thamel, where she shared and reflected on her experiences. She did not sense her caste as influencing her everyday childhood. Rather, her narrative is marked by long invisibility, in which caste remained hidden until certain institutional and personal conditions revealed it.

Growing Up as Meena Gurung

Meena was born and grew up in Kathmandu and studied at Princeton School and then at Global College for her higher secondary education. She spoke of her childhood as typical, like that of most urban children.

She did not think about caste during these years. She was brought up without questioning her surname, Gurung. She said, *“I never felt excluded or discriminated against in school, nor did I feel I had to justify my background.”* In retrospect, she understood that this feeling of normalcy stemmed from the unawareness of her caste identity.

When she was growing up, she said, “*Caste never occurred to me. My early life was thus caste-free, not that caste was non-existent, but the caste had not yet been shown to me.*”

The SLC Form: When Identity Became Official

The realization of the caste identity first came to Meena when she was filling in her SLC examination forms. One of the teachers observed her information and told her to write the surname Bishwakarma rather than Gurung. She added, “*This request confused me. Until then, I had not thought that my surname was not necessarily my official caste identity. She could not understand why she had to write it.*”

During the mock tests, she still wrote Gurung instinctively. Later, after speaking with her parents, she began to understand the situation. They explained their caste to them and asked her to write Bishwakarma on official documents.

At the time, she was going along without fully realizing the social connotations of the name. In her case, it was initially an administrative change, not a social one. It was only later that she came to understand the broader sense of caste identity.

Family History and Protection Concealment

After this experience, Meena learned more about her family's history. Her father had moved to Kathmandu at a young age in search of employment and later settled in the city. He had been discriminated against in the caste system in earlier years and chose to change his surname to Gurung, in the hope that his children would not be subjected to the same.

This was not a choice to deny their identity, but a way to secure improved opportunities within the family. In adopting a surname that was not an immediate indicator of Dalit status, there was hope that the family would not face discrimination in education, jobs, and social relationships.

Meena said “*My elder siblings have also been brought up with the Gurung surname. This enabled them to navigate in the city without drawing attention to their caste.*”

Her mother, who was a member of the Tharu community, did not at first grasp the necessity of this kind of caution. But through time, she learned to be concerned about the family's potential discrimination.

In retrospect, Meena realized that her comparatively easy childhood had been influenced by these safeguarding choices.

Living Without Disclosure

Meena spent much of her education and early career operating within institutions without revealing her caste identity. She still used her family name, Gurung, whenever she could, and very seldom when she had to reveal her caste. *“Unless I told them, people wouldn’t know,”* said she.

This invisibility enabled her to get away with direct discrimination, but also produced a subtle feeling of uncertainty. She added, *“I did not feel in constant fear, but I understood that the disclosure could change how others related to me.”*

Silence became an ordinary state instead of a stressful one over time. She had never told her caste to any of her workmates or even the majority of her friends. She was not asked directly, hence she had no urge to share it. Her life demonstrates that urban life can conceal caste when it is not openly discussed.

Overhearing Caste Talk

Even though Meena did not have to reveal her identity very often, she still often overheard caste-related remarks in the workplace and in social contexts. Because others believed she was Gurung, some were always comfortable talking about Dalits in her presence. In some instances, these remarks were made as casual observations or stereotypes rather than as insults. Nevertheless, they also made her uncomfortable. She said:

A challenging experience I had was when my colleagues would mock others because of their Dalit background and actions. Since she did not know her identity, she could not refute these comments without revealing herself. This gave rise to an emotional dilemma in me. It was difficult not to say anything and risky to say something. Such were hard times. Not necessarily because they spoke of me per se, but because I was able to observe how effortlessly people could make prejudice look good.

These experiences gave her the insight that caste prejudice tends to work with assumptions about who was present in a conversation. The concealment saved her against overt discrimination; however, it also put her in the emotional strain of observing discrimination but being unable to act.

Marriage, Disclosure, and Conditional Acceptance

Caste was inevitable in the life of Meena when she got into a serious relationship, which later resulted in marriage. She met her husband on social media when he was residing in Australia. As their relationship grew closer, she felt like

revealing her caste identity to him. She recalled that, “*He replied affirmatively and informed her that caste did not matter to him. Nevertheless, his family's approval was more complex.*” However, there was disappointment, when his father found out about her caste, and the engagement was almost broken. Meena termed this time to be emotionally stressful, full of fear that the relationship would break up due to her caste.

She added that, “*She did not wish to keep quiet during this period. Rather, she directly questioned her future father-in-law on whether he was hesitant because of caste. Why are you rejecting me? Is it only because of caste?*”

This was one of the few occasions when she confronted caste prejudice rather than privately controlling it. Even though the wedding went on, the acceptance was rather conditional, and she was under pressure to control how her caste identity was represented within the extended family.

She was still worried that she would be asked about her background during the wedding period.

I was careful not to focus on caste and therefore made sure to make special reference to her maternal Tharu culture during ceremonies. Indicatively, I urged her maternal family members to wear Tharu traditional clothing, which shifted the focus from caste to ethnicity.

Despite the success of the wedding, she stated that “*I carried emotional tension throughout the process.*”

The Life of an Invisible Identity

When looking back on her life, Meena explained her caste experience not as constant conflict, but as defined by many years of invisibility. Caste hardly came up in her day-to-day life, but was in the background in family choices, institutional practices, and silent societal norms. Silence was no longer a conscious strategy but a habit developed through experience.

The narration of her life reveals that not being visible does not imply being caste-free. Rather, it can be navigating belonging by making delicate choices on what to disclose and what to say. In conclusion, the story of Meena demonstrates that caste in city life can remain hidden for a long time; however, in some situations, it can quickly become central, as in official documentation and marriage arrangements. Her experience shows that acceptance is usually conditional on close identity management rather than social inclusion.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced and discussed the life stories of four Dalit youngsters: Abhisha, Avash, Sita, and Meena, and how they came to be aware of their caste identity in the urban setting of Kathmandu. The chapter portrayed, through their stories that the caste consciousness does not occur uniformly but rather develops through various personal, institutional, and social experiences.

CHAPTER V
NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: NEGOTIATING DALIT
IDENTITY

This chapter shifts the collection of individual stories from Chapter 4 to a study of a shared set of themes arising from the experiences of Abhisha, Avash, Sita, and Meena. Although the last chapter concerned personal life stories, the current chapter addresses larger themes that describe how Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu make sense of and negotiate their caste identity.

The discussion demonstrates that caste still affects identity, feelings, and social relations, even in urban settings generally viewed as more accepting. The experiences of participants show that caste is enforced not only by direct discrimination but also in the form of unspoken social expectations, identity management approaches, and daily interactions.

Identity Management Strategies: Passing, Concealing, and Disclosure

The experiences of participants demonstrate that Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu are proactive in shaping how their caste identity is framed across various social settings. Their tactics were to pass as non-Dalit by using ambiguous surnames, hide their identity by remaining silent, and selectively reveal their caste based on the degree of trust and safety in relationships. These were not just personal decisions but an answer to social forces in which caste remains a factor in acceptance and belonging.

Concealment and Passing as Strategies of Protection

Abhisha, Sita, and Meena often passed as higher caste or did not reveal their caste identity. Their last names were significant in facilitating this process. Their names often led them to avoid questioning about their background because it was associated with non-Dalit communities.

For example, the surname Abhisha led others to believe she was Chhetri, whereas Sita was presumed to be Brahmin because of her surname. Equally, the family of Meena adopted the surname Gurung as a protective measure to reduce the risk of discrimination.

These experiences are what scholars refer to as de-Dalitisation, in which people reduce the observable identities of caste to evade stigma (Pfaff-Czarnecka,

2019). These strategies may expand access to opportunities such as housing, education, and employment that would otherwise be limited in urban settings (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

There were, however, emotional costs involved in concealment. The participants spoke of how they constantly monitored their speech and interactions to avoid revealing who they are. This kind of self-control often leads to nervousness and stress.

Studies on identity concealment reveal that concealing an identity that is stigmatized may cause psychological stress, such as stress and a diminished sense of belonging (Folmar, 2019). This was also evident in how the participants described feeling wary of their daily encounters, despite not having been directly discriminated against.

Disclosure and Trust: Selective Disclosure

Some participants engaged in selective disclosure rather than full concealment. This was by disclosing their caste identity only when they were not threatened or when they had a reason to be truthful to keep trust.

Indicatively, Abhisha decided to reveal her caste identity to her partner because she believed that intimate relationships ought to be founded on honesty. In the same vein, Meena even revealed her caste to her prospective husband before discussions of marriage could go on.

These instances indicate that disclosure used to be primarily about trust rather than mere identity politics. Meanwhile, these revelations occasionally revealed the limits of tolerance, especially when families responded differently to an individual.

Selective disclosure was thus an individual choice as well as an experiment of social acceptance.

Open Assertion of Identity

Unlike the concealment strategies, Avash always chose to openly identify as Dalit. The fact that he chose to keep the last name Sunar was evidence of not wanting to conceal caste markers, even when others advised him to do so, because it might help lessen discrimination.

His story depicts what other researchers refer to as re-Dalitization, where people willingly reaffirm caste identity as a reaction against it (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). In the case of Avash, openness did not mean just being proud of oneself but also defying the assumption that Dalit identity is something to be concealed.

Simultaneously, the social costs of openness were also demonstrated in his experience. His relationship failed because of differing caste and, at times, he did face indirect pressure from peers to embrace strategies of concealment instead.

This opposition of concealing and asserting shows that Dalit youths frequently have to make hard decisions between social acceptance and identity affirmation. Neither approach fully protects people from the impacts of caste, underscoring the persistence of caste even in an urban setting.

Emotional Cost of Identity Management

Negotiation between authenticity and safety was always needed in the identity management of all participants. Even though concealment might offer short-term protection against discrimination, it often leads to a sense of insecurity and conditional membership. Open assertion, on the other hand, may reinforce identity, but it can also lead to exclusion.

These experiences indicate that identity management is not a fixed strategy but an ongoing process influenced by evolving social situations. Dalit youth have to make decisions again and again about whether to be silent, reveal, or affirm their identity.

Collectively, these results demonstrate that the identity management of Dalit young people cannot be explained by personal choice but by the reaction to the structural inequities, which still influence the daily social relations.

Microaggressions and Subtle Discrimination in Urban Spaces

Even though no blunt forms of untouchability were frequently documented in the urban experiences of the participants, their stories demonstrate that caste discrimination still functions using the forms of microaggression, indirect marginalization, and even everyday social interactions. These experiences show that caste in Kathmandu, especially in urban areas, is frequently displayed not by overt gestures of exclusion but through mini-interactions that support social hierarchy.

Verbal Microaggressions and Microaggression

The respondents reported verbal microaggressions as casual remarks, indirect comments, and even harmless jokes that carried underlying caste assumptions.

To illustrate, the fact that Sita was being called intelligent, though being in the lower caste, demonstrates how even praise may strengthen the hierarchy by making Dalit success seem unusual, not natural. In a similar manner, Avash explained how caste stereotypes were played out in jokes about clothing that was linked to the humiliating Dalits through their clothes.

These comments tend to be vague and thus hard to confront. The overall impact, however, strengthened ideas of difference and non-belonging. Researchers refer to such experiences as microaggressions- subtle and frequently normalized acts of prejudice that may have a serious psychological impact in the long run (Folmar, 2019). Since these comments are usually indirect, people may have difficulty determining whether they are being discriminated against, which can lead to additional emotional stress.

Conditional Belonging and Social Exclusion

The participants also explained how social acceptance was usually determined by the fact that their caste identity was unknown. Such conditional belonging was evident in housing, friendships, and intimate relationships.

An example is the family of Sita, who was discriminated against in terms of housing after their caste was revealed. Likewise, the breakup between Avash and his girlfriend was caused by a caste mismatch in the family. Meena also talked about how she managed her identity to be accepted in her marital family.

These case studies demonstrate that inclusion in urban social space is not always stable and requires preserving silence about caste identity. Although participants could engage in social and professional settings, this was not always complete acceptance; it was conditional.

A study of caste relations in urban areas also indicates that discrimination tends to shift toward subtle forms of boundary maintenance rather than direct exclusion (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Listening to Caste Talk When Not Identified

One of the most complicated experiences that was reported by the participants was being subjected to caste-related prejudice when other people assumed the participants were not Dalits. This situation put participants in an awkward position because answering such comments might expose their true selves.

Meena told about conversations in the workplace where her colleagues were talking ill about Dalits without knowing her background. Sita also related the same cases that happened in schools where caste stereotypes were openly discussed.

These experiences were emotionally tense since participants were forced to weigh their safety against their discomfort in listening to discriminatory remarks. Silence was a way of protection, and at the same time, developed conflict within.

These scenarios explain that caste prejudice still exists in places where individuals believe there are no Dalits. When this happens, silence never represents consent but rather shows the limitations individuals have in responding safely.

Subtle Discrimination Psychological Effects

Even though direct exclusion was not always described by the participants, the effect of subtle discrimination contributed to the formation of perceptions of belonging and safety. Emotional strain was caused by casual remarks, uncertainty about being accepted, and the need to always be on guard.

These experiences were not separate episodes, but rather part of a larger pattern that meant participants had to be sensitive to how caste could shape social lives. A study of chronic exposure to the mild form of discrimination demonstrates that such exposure may impact confidence, feelings of belonging, and emotional health (Kiang et al., 2018). The participants' experiences demonstrate the pattern and how implicit discrimination can influence daily decision-making, even in the absence of conflict.

Urban Modernity and the Continuity of Caste

Collectively, these experiences challenge the belief that urban settings automatically diminish caste discrimination. Even though the participants reported having fewer experiences of overt untouchability than in rural settings, their testimonies indicate that caste still functions in less obvious social ways.

Urban spaces can be anonymized and create new possibilities, yet they do not have to remove caste-based assumptions. Rather, discrimination can be made less visible, but it will still impact social relations and access to opportunities. Such discoveries thus indicate that caste in Nepal cities has not been entirely eliminated, but rather it has changed to suit new social conditions, where it functions through indirect modes of exclusion and in daily social life.

Agency and Strategic Resistance: Reclaiming Identity

Although participants had to deal with some subtle discrimination and the burdens of identity management, they did not react passively to caste. Their stories show various forms of agency, in which they believed, criticized prejudices, safeguarded their dignity, and affirmed their identities in their daily lives. Such reactions were a direct confrontation with less obvious forms of resistance, such as selective disclosure, identity assertion, and the tactical use of social spaces.

Emotional Confrontation and Personal Resistance

There were instances of resistance through direct emotional confrontation. For instance, Meena confronted her father-in-law about his reluctance to marry her by asking him point-blank whether caste was the issue. This was a break from her normal practice of silence and was a significant act of assertion.

On the same note, Abhisha has shown resistance by critically reflecting on herself after incidents like the one at her friend's house. Instead of just accepting the social discomfort, she started asking herself whether or not accepting without recognizing herself meant anything.

These examples demonstrate that resistance does not necessarily involve public or political actions. Individual choices to challenge bias or seek respect may also be significant forms of agency.

Claiming Identity as Resistance

There was also some form of resistance, with some participants openly acknowledging their caste identity despite social pressure to hide it. This form of resistance is seen in Avash's choice not to change his surname, Sunar. In his case, his retention of the surname was a conscious rejection of the belief that Dalit identity is meant to be concealed to be socially acceptable.

In the same vein, the fact that Sita decided to make her identity as a Dalit known on social media when discussing the caste-based violence is also indicative of how digital spaces can offer room to assert identity. She was actually somewhat criticized by a few members of her family, but she considered this a significant gesture of responsibility and consciousness.

Such practices demonstrate that identity assertion can serve as a form of daily resistance against demands that marginalized identities be silent.

Strategic Negotiation of Identity

Agency was also exhibited by participants in more nuanced ways of negotiating identity. For example, the case of Meena reveals how people can tactically focus on particular features of identity to minimize caste scrutiny, such as when Meena chooses to make her mother's ethnicity more pronounced during wedding ceremonies.

These are the real-life strategies of negotiating caste. These activities are not symbols of denying their identity; instead, these are expressions of Dalit youth making choices to safeguard themselves without negating key relationships.

According to scholars, these practices are called strategic negotiations, in which people adjust the image they present in different situations (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

Resistance as Identity Formation

These various types of resistance also influenced how the participants perceived themselves. Encounters of confrontation, revelation, or identity affirmation tended to mark turning points that enhanced participants' identities. In terms of narrative identity theory, these moments can transform how people make sense of their life stories and shift the accounts they have of being constrained toward stories of agency and resilience. Likewise, in the social identity view, identity assertion may enhance group membership and reduce negative stereotypes by enhancing positive identification with marginalized groups.

Everyday Resistance in Urban Contexts

Combined, these experiences demonstrate that resistance among Dalit youth is usually done in commonplace ways, unlike structured activism. Choices about when to talk, when to keep quiet, and when to affirm their identity were all ways the participants negotiated caste hierarchies in their everyday lives.

These results indicate that one cannot solely comprehend Dalit youth within the concept of vulnerability. They are resilient, adaptable, and active in enforcing the social structures that affect their lives, as their experiences show.

Intersectional Dimensions of Caste

Caste is not enough to explain the experiences of Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu. The stories of the participants reveal that caste overlaps with other social determinants, including gender, class, and urban place, and produces various sources of both marginalization and opportunity. An intersectional approach can thus be used to understand why Dalit youth do not have a singular experience of caste but are instead affected by it in different ways.

Gender Experiences of Caste

The issue of gender became crucial in shaping how participants navigated the caste. Specifically, Dalit women in this study experienced more pressures associated with marriage, family, and social acceptance.

For example, Abhisha's case in her relationship showed how caste can override other forms of success, such as education and character traits. Equally, Meena's experience in the marriage negotiation process illustrated how women are

under pressure to control their caste identity as a strategy to remain accepted by the family.

The same could be seen in the case of Sita. The cautions of the family members to be careful about revealing caste demonstrate how Dalit women can be persuaded to focus on social control rather than on ensuring the expression of identity.

These experiences indicate what researchers report to be the intersection of caste and patriarchy, where women tend to bear more weight in ensuring that social limits are upheld by marriage and family practices (Kharel, 2010). By contrast, although Avash was also discriminated against, especially in romantic relationships, he was not under the same pressure concerning family honor or identity masking. This opposition underscores the difference between the operation of caste between genders.

Life in an Urban Environment and the Felt In-betweenness

The urban setting also influenced how participants experienced caste. Education and employment opportunities, and social mobility existed in Kathmandu, and at times this enabled caste identity to be less visible than in the rural environment. Simultaneously, the participants reported feeling in-between, neither totally excluded nor accepted. Temporary inclusion was sometimes permitted in urban settings, but the inclusion might have to rely on disguise or appropriate identity control.

For example, the fact that Meena had been brought up in a family with a different surname enabled her to navigate urban life without being directly discriminated against. The process of marriage negotiations revealed to her how caste might easily get serious when social relations became formalized.

In the same light, Avash's experience showed that, even when caste is publicly recognized, there can still be unacknowledged social expectations that dictate acceptance. The fact that his friends recommended a change in his last name showed the inability to get rid of caste thinking even in an educated urban society.

These experiences imply that city life can minimize explicit forms of discrimination but still uphold social distance in subtler ways.

Mobility and Social Tensions

The participants in this study were well educated and representative of upwardly mobile Dalit youths. Education opened opportunities, but it also exposed them to a social setting where caste differences were more apparent. Even among

educated counterparts, Avash observed that caste attitudes persisted. His experience indicates that caste prejudice does not necessarily disappear with education.

The literature on the mobility of caste in urban areas also indicates the possibility of Dalits entering the realms of professionals, which is considered a challenge to the hierarchies established, and might sometimes result in subtle exclusion (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

The experience that Meena undergoes in the marriage negotiations also demonstrates the lack of full social acceptance of class mobility. Even with her education and professional career, caste played a significant role in her assessment. These results imply that mobility across classes can create new opportunities and, at the same time, subject Dalit youth to new forms of scrutiny.

Intersectionality in Learning of Caste

When combined, these results demonstrate that caste plays a role in conjunction with gender, class, and city of residence to influence the sense of belonging and exclusion in Dalit youth. These factors do not work in isolation; they interact to produce different experiences for different people. An intersectional approach can thus be used to understand the reason why Dalit youths cannot be homogenized. Their lives differ based on gender, education, and social settings.

In a theoretical sense, intersectionality emphasizes that intersecting identities may create new obstacles and new agency. The stories of participants reveal how Dalit young people are on the frontline in dealing with these combined pressures as they learn how to cope with the sense of identity and belonging.

All in all, this discussion reveals that caste in urban Kathmandu functions within a wider range of social inequalities. These overlapping influences are not only key to understanding the issues faced by Dalit youth but also the resilience they exhibit.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The results indicate that in urban Kathmandu, Dalit youths actively control how they present their caste identity in their daily social environment. The strategies of passing, concealment, selective disclosure, and open assertion are not only the response to social environments in which caste remains central to determining belonging and opportunity, but also personal choices.

Participants with ambiguous surnames or evasive participants demonstrated the role of identity management as a strategy for successful survival. Concealment in places like housing, education, and social relationships enabled temporary entry into the arenas where the Dalit identity would be visible and lead to exclusion. One can also find similar patterns in the literature on urban caste relations, as Dalits have developed what has been termed as de-Dalitization strategies to lessen the stigma and enhance social mobility (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019).

The findings, however, indicate that concealment has substantial emotional costs. Participants explained how they had to always be mindful of the way their identity was perceived, and this could occasionally lead to anxiety and a feeling of conditional belonging. The experiences indicate that identity concealment cannot be interpreted as merely an individual choice but as a reaction to the persisting social inequalities.

The theory of Social Identity helps explain this trend by suggesting that members of marginalized groups may seek to reduce social hierarchies by minimizing observable signs of difference when group markers are somewhat flexible (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This can be used to make passing a feasible way to avoid discrimination, which might be increasingly difficult in urban settings where caste is not always on display.

Meanwhile, Avash's experiences show another way in light of open identity assertion. By keeping his caste surname, he demonstrates his conscious refusal to accept the notion that Dalit identity should not be revealed in order to fit in society. This is what other researchers refer to as identity reclamation processes, in which people confront stigma by boldly identifying with marginalized identities (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Notably, the comparison between hiding and declaring is used to reveal the challenging decisions Dalit youth face. Although concealment can serve a temporary protective role, it can also undermine authenticity and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, open assertion can be more strengthening of identity and also can put people in social danger. These results indicate that identity management among Dalit youth can be described as an ongoing negotiation of safety, dignity, and belonging.

This is further enhanced by an intersectional approach, which reveals the ways these strategies are influenced by gender and class. As an illustration, women respondents indicated higher levels of pressure to be careful about caste identity when in marriage and family acceptance. This indicates the ways in which caste and gender expectations articulate identity decisions for men and women differently.

In general, these results indicate that identity management among Dalit youth is not merely a matter of concealing or disclosing caste, but rather of negotiating challenging social demands in contexts where caste has not been abolished, but rather operates in less observable forms. This counters a popular belief about urbanization as a given eradication of caste disparity, instead demonstrating that caste still shapes daily identity negotiation in modern-day Nepali towns.

Microaggressions and Subtle Discrimination in Urban Spaces

The results of this research indicate that overt caste discrimination might not be so evident in urban Kathmandu, but caste is still present in the manifestation of subtle forms of exclusion, including microaggressions, indirect remarks, and conditional social acceptance. These experiences indicate that caste has not disappeared in urban areas, but has taken on more indirect and less visible forms.

Participants' experiences reveal that microaggressions are often manifested in everyday communication (casual remarks, ability assumptions, social responses after caste disclosure). Whilst these events might seem insignificant when analyzed separately, their compounding nature influenced the participants' interpretation of belonging and difference in urban settings.

The results align with studies indicating that less pronounced forms of discrimination tend to substitute for obvious exclusion when formal equality is prioritized, but social attitudes are less willing to shift (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Caste boundaries can be enforced less directly by daily interactions, which indicate who is truly part of the group and who is not.

The Social Identity Theory also explains how these kinds of interactions can strengthen caste inequalities by continuing to divide the higher castes into in-groups and Dalits into an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although discrimination may not be overt, nonverbal cues may foster perceptions of reduced social status and shape how people view themselves in social contexts.

Another valuable lesson learned from the findings is the notion of conditional belonging. Participants' experiences indicate that the issue of acceptance in the urban setting was mostly related to whether caste identity was known or unknown. This tendency means that inclusion can occasionally be grounded in assumptions rather than in social equality.

The psychological impacts of these experiences were not necessarily manifested as direct trauma, but the necessity of being aware all the time. Participants said they learned to be sensitive to how conversations, jokes, or social context could reveal underlying caste attitudes. This indicates that studies show exposure to microaggressions may affect confidence and perceived belonging, even without explicit exclusion, through repeated exposure (Kiang et al., 2018).

An intersectional approach also demonstrates that these experiences were informed by gender and social conditions. Indicatively, Dalit women in this study have spoken of other pressures related to respectability, marriage, and the family's reputation. These results indicate that microaggressions are not equally experienced but are shaped by social identities.

These results, on the whole, contradict the widely held belief that urbanization, in and of itself, reduces caste discrimination. They instead imply that caste is perpetuated by everyday social practices that might seem insignificant but, together, determine identity, opportunity, and belonging. It is thus necessary to understand these minor forms of discrimination in order to identify how caste continues to operate in modern urban society.

Agency and Strategic Resistance: Reclaiming Identity

Although the results of this research show how Dalit youth struggle with the realities of urban life, it also shows that participants were not just passive receivers of discrimination. Rather, their accounts disclose various forms of agency they used to bargain with caste hierarchies and claim dignity in their daily lives.

Indirect and direct forms of resistance were exhibited by the participants. This, in certain instances, meant publicly going against the discriminatory mind, and in

other instances, strategic moves concerning when and how to reveal caste identity. Such reactions demonstrate that resistance does not necessarily have to take the form of organized activism; it can also manifest in the day-to-day assertion of self and in identity negotiation.

As examples, the decisions to openly keep a Dalit surname, to disclose caste selectively in relationships, or to challenge discriminatory attitudes at the familial level portray how the participants played a leading role in how their identities were recognized. These activities can be interpreted as daily resistance directed at the expectation that Dalits should do so.

According to the Narrative Identity Theory, these moments can be seen as significant turning points in participants' life stories. Encounters with discrimination or identification tended to become moments in which participants reconstructed their experiences not merely as barriers but also as points that enabled them to feel strong and self-determined (Clandinin & Huber, 2002).

On the same note, the Social Identity Theory can be used to explain how identity assertion can serve as a means of rejecting negative group categorization. By publicly identifying as Dalits, participants like Avash and Sita confronted stigma and strengthened their sense of belonging to the marginalized yet resilient community (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

An intersectional approach also highlights differences in resistance strategies based on gender and social circumstances. Indicatively, women participants were frequently required to juggle identity assertion and expectations regarding family acceptance and marriage. Their opposition, thus, was at times more subtle, such as strategic disclosure or emotional negotiation in family relationships.

These results also indicate the significance of identifying Dalit youth not only in the prism of discrimination but also in terms of their strength and flexibility. The experiences they go through illustrate how people engage in the production of meanings and in reactions to structural inequalities, rather than being constructed by them.

In general, the results indicate that Dalit youth resistance in urban Kathmandu typically takes the form of everyday negotiation rather than mass political action. These types of agencies underscore the fact that the marginalized youth actively build significant identities despite the existence of caste-based inequalities.

Intersectional aspects of Caste in Urban Lives

The results of this research indicate that the experiences of Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu cannot be explained solely by caste. Instead, the stories of participants show the intersection of caste and gender, upward mobility across classes, and urban settings, creating various forms of marginalization and opportunities. What is necessary to comprehend the diversity of Dalit youth's experiences is an intersectional approach.

Gender emerged as a significant factor in how participants perceived caste. Participants of both sexes reported specific additional pressure on marriage, family acceptance, and social expectations. According to their experience, caste and gender tend to interact in most of the situations, especially when women are supposed to uphold marriage and social conformity in order to enhance family honor.

For example, women participants have explained that they need to be more vigilant about revealing their identities in romantic relationships and family negotiations. These experiences mirror trends found in caste studies at large, whereby women tend to be under more pressure to control caste parameters since caste hierarchy collides with patriarchal demands (Kharel, 2010).

Comparatively, male subjects also had to put up with caste-based marginalization, especially in love and social attitudes. Their stories, however, indicate that they were not subjected to the same level of pressure regarding family honor and the concealment of identity. This opposition demonstrates the difference between caste functioning on gendered social expectations.

The urban setting was also a factor that influenced the participants' experiences. Kathmandu was an educational, employment, and relative anonymity hub. Caste identity was also less pronounced in urban settings due to these circumstances. This invisibility, however, did not mean complete social inclusion.

Rather, respondents tended to talk about feeling in between, how they could reach new possibilities but still experience some forms of exclusion. According to these findings, the urban setting can still change, rather than necessarily eradicating caste boundaries, substituting open forms of discrimination with more subtle social differentiation.

These experiences are also complicated by the mobility between classes. The sample for this research was drawn from comparatively educated and upwardly mobile Dalit youths. Although education and professional opportunities opened the

way for upward mobility, they also placed the participants in a setting where caste disparity was at times more pronounced.

These results align with the literature, which holds that upwardly mobile Dalits can be seen as threatening established hierarchies, and this can lead to socially resistant tendencies, even at a more subtle level, in dominant communities (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2019). This means that mobility across classes does not necessarily eliminate caste barriers but can instead redefine their experience.

Collectively, these results indicate the relevance of intersectionality to the study of caste in modern urban settings. Caste, gender, class, and urban location are not independent, but they interact and influence the ways of Dalit youth exclusion and belonging.

Theoretically, this implies that Dalit youth cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group. They have different experiences based on their social status and individual conditions. This diversity should be acknowledged to develop a more nuanced understanding of caste in contemporary urban Nepal.

In general, this intersectional discussion illuminates the ways in which caste remains present in broader systems of social injustice and demonstrates how Dalit youth are engaged in negotiating these compounded effects on their identities and futures.

Unique Contributions of the Study

The present research contributes to the literature on caste, identity, and urban social life in Nepal in several important ways by examining the lived experiences of Dalit youth. These are empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions.

Empirical contribution: Focus on Urban Dalit Youth

The research adds value to this literature by setting its scope to Dalit youth in Kathmandu's urban areas, a population that has not been adequately addressed by scholars. Much of the current caste studies on Nepal either focus on caste relations in rural areas or on structural caste discrimination. By contrast, the paper sheds light on the functioning of caste in the daily experiences of educated Dalit young people in urban settings.

This study highlights how caste still affects urban life, even in places where implicit discrimination is less apparent, by emphasizing themes of identity negotiation, emotional experiences, and daily social interactions. By doing so, it challenges the belief that urbanization is bound to reduce caste inequality.

Methodology Contribution: Narrative Inquiry

The methodology of this work is also valuable as it applies the narrative inquiry to the experience of caste. Although surveys or structural analysis are the basis of many studies on caste, this study shows the importance of narrative methods for understanding how people perceive and construct a sense of what they are going through.

The research shows how identity is disrupted, the emotional cost of concealment, and how resistance strategies are developed by paying attention to participants' life stories. Such subjective aspects of caste experience are often difficult to quantify using quantitative methods, yet they are significant for understanding caste functioning in daily life.

Theoretical Contribution: Intersectional understanding of Dalit Youth Identity

The theoretical contribution of this study is that it shows how caste intersects with gender, class mobility, and urban location to influence various experiences of the Dalit youth. Instead of treating Dalits as a homogeneous population, the findings indicate that social position plays a role in determining experiences of discrimination and strategies of resistance.

Specifically, the analysis points to the fact that Dalit women are subjected to further forms of pressure regarding marriage, family demands, and identity revelation, whereas upwardly mobile Dalit youth might experience the new types of implicit exclusion regardless of their educational achievement. This intersectional approach provides a better understanding of caste in modern Nepalese urban life.

Positional Contribution: Insider Perspective

Lastly, the researcher's positionality within the Dalit community is a contribution to this study. This insider approach fostered trust, openness, and greater involvement in participants' experience. It also enabled the research to capture minor forms of exclusion and the day-to-day negotiations that are otherwise missed in outsider research.

Meanwhile, this positionality necessitated special attention to reflexivity to uphold analytical distance and ethical accountability. Through a synthesis of insider knowledge and critical reflection, this research is part of efforts to make marginalized voices central to caste studies.

Combined, these contributions help highlight the value of analyzing caste as a structural system and a lived social reality that shapes identity, belonging, and daily

interaction. This study integrates narrative inquiry with thematic and theoretical analysis to offer a subtle insight into how Dalit youth negotiate caste in the modern-day urban setting of Nepal.

Implications of the Findings

This research has significant implications, both academic, social, and policy-related, for understanding caste and identity among Dalit youth in urban Nepal. By emphasizing the daily life of identity negotiation, implicit discrimination, and resistance, the study offers insights that extend beyond the research context.

Academic Implications

The research can also be relevant to the study of identity and inequality, as it shows how caste may still shape identity formation even in rapidly urbanizing, modernizing contexts. The results reveal that the urban setting does not wipe out caste but rather alters its modes of functioning, and in many ways, the discrimination is no longer a matter of being ostracized but a matter of subtle social interactions.

The research also adds to Narrative Identity Theory by demonstrating that caste experiences shape how Dalit youth conceptualize turning points in their lives, particularly identity discovery, discrimination, and resistance. Likewise, the results are consistent with Social Identity Theory, demonstrating that subtle discrimination can affirm group boundaries, whereas identity assertion can support positive group identification.

Moreover, through an intersectional approach, the research reveals the interactions among caste, gender, and class mobility, generating diverse experiences among Dalit youth. This underscores the need to study caste not in isolation but within the context of other forms of social inequality.

Social Implications

The results also point to the need for greater social awareness of the still-existing caste in urban Nepal. Though cities are believed to be more socially progressive, the experiences of participants prove that minor discrimination still influences the daily life of Dalit youth.

Identifying such experiences is significant to enhance empathy and understanding in non-Dalit communities. Specifically, the research indicates that the silence of Dalit youth cannot be understood as an affirmation of the existence of caste inequality but rather as a means to cope with the potentially discriminatory conditions.

Having more people speak about the nuanced forms of caste discrimination could thus help to break the notion that caste is no longer an issue in urban settings and foster more accommodating social views.

Policy Implications

The study also proposes policy implications. Despite the liberal legal frameworks of Nepal on the topic of caste discrimination, their actual experiences show that there is a discrepancy between the legal frameworks and the social reality of the people. The problem of caste inequality should, then, be treated not only as direct discrimination but also as indirect discrimination.

The findings reveal several areas of intervention. First, schools might contribute more to solving caste prejudice by implementing inclusive programs that raise awareness of modern caste-based discrimination and encourage students to discuss it critically.

Second, caste-sensitivity training may be helpful in institutions such as workplaces, housing sectors, and even public service organizations to detect and mitigate subtle forms of bias that might otherwise go undetected.

Third, the results indicate that mental health intervention is significant to the Dalit youth who undergo the psychological impact of identity concealment and subtle discrimination. These issues may be mitigated by providing accessible, culturally sensitive support services.

Lastly, it is significant to reinforce the enforcement of current anti-discrimination policies. This involves better reporting and ensuring subtle forms of exclusion are not treated lightly in comparison with more obvious forms of discrimination.

On the whole, these implications suggest that the process of reducing caste inequality in urban Nepal will require not only legal changes but also social awareness and institutional commitment to inclusion. It is also a significant move to acknowledge the daily lives of Dalit youth to develop more effective academic knowledge, social discourse, and policy responses.

Direction for Future Research

Based on the results and limitations of this research, several directions for future research can be identified.

To begin with, future research might focus on a comparative study of Dalit youth experiences across various urban centers in Nepal and across urban and rural

settings. This kind of comparison would help explain the roles of geographical location and local social arrangements in identity negotiation and discrimination.

Second, longitudinal studies of Dalit youth over extended periods would be valuable for offering insights into how identity management strategies change over time. This would also assist the researchers in learning more about the psychological and social consequences of subtle discrimination and conditional belonging in the long run.

Third, intersectional experiences between Dalit communities might be further investigated in future studies by prioritizing more underrepresented groups in the research, including Dalit LGBTQ+ youth or Dalits who are not part of English and ethnic majority groups. This kind of work would enhance knowledge of the interactions among various types of marginalization.

Lastly, conducting research on interventions to decrease caste-based discrimination would be helpful. Research on the outcomes of educational programs, awareness campaigns, and institutional reforms could yield valuable practical insights for policy and social change.

One can draw conclusions about the need for further research on caste that does not merely analyze it as a structural problem but rather as a lived experience shaped by evolving social circumstances.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine how Dalit youth in urban Kathmandu represent, negotiate, and claim their caste identity in the context of their daily lives. The studies of Abhisha, Avash, Sita, and Meena reveal that caste is an important factor in identity formation, relationships, and daily life, even in urban spaces that many social studies tend to view as more socially open.

The results indicate that caste awareness develops through various routes, including early socialization in the family and subsequent institutionalization. These experiences shape how Dalit youth conceptualize themselves and their engagement with social contexts. It is also revealed that the strategies of identity management, such as concealment, selective disclosure, and open assertion, are not merely personal inclinations but also reactions to ongoing social inequalities.

Moreover, the study also underscores how caste discrimination in urban environments is frequently facilitated by nuanced practices like microaggressions, conditional belonging, and indirect exclusion, as opposed to overt untouchability

practices. These forms of discrimination are not as evident, but they still influence the sense of belonging and opportunity among Dalit youth.

Meanwhile, the research reveals that Dalit youth are not mere observers of these issues. The various expressions of agency demonstrated by the participants took the form of everyday resistance, identity assertion, and strategic negotiation of social relationships. These experiences emphasize the strength and flexibility of Dalit youths in negotiating complex social requirements.

Using Narrative Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory, and an intersectional approach, this study offers further insight into how caste operates as both a structural system and a lived experience. It reveals that the caste in urban Nepal has not vanished but rather has become exposed, both in terms of interactions and identity formation, and in overt exclusion.

On the whole, the current study adds to the growing body of literature highlighting the significance of studying caste as a developing social fact. It puts the voices of Dalit youth to the fore to emphasize that identity is always formed through experience, thought, and confrontation.

Finally, this study has shown that to consider caste in modern Nepal, it is necessary to look beyond laws and policies and focus on the life experiences that reproduce and oppose inequality. These lived-in experiences are what need to be heard to build a more inclusive social space and to counteract the less apparent manifestations of caste discrimination that still have a hold on Dalit youth.

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