

Dalit Representation in Mainstreaming Programs: Evidence from Nagarjun-7, Kathmandu, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the status, accessibility, participation, and perceived effectiveness of Dalit representation in mainstreaming programs in Nagarjun Municipality-7, Kathmandu. The study employed a mixed-method descriptive design within an interpretive orientation, using purposive sampling to include 20 respondents, comprising 11 Dalit and 9 non-Dalit participants, along with three key informants. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observation, and were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation. The findings indicate that mainstreaming programs have contributed to socio-economic development, awareness of rights and policies, leadership development, networking, advocacy, and more inclusive decision-making. Community-based organizations, particularly consumer committees, provided comparatively stronger opportunities for meaningful participation and representation. However, Dalit participation remains constrained by caste-based discrimination, poverty, limited access to education and information, inadequate institutional support, limited opportunities, and weak participation in monitoring and evaluation. The study further reveals a gap between formal inclusion and substantive representation: although several programs and policies are available, Dalit participation does not always translate into meaningful decision-making power and influence. The findings, interpreted through the Dumontian, Participatory, and Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive perspectives, demonstrate that caste hierarchy, unequal power relations, and institutional barriers continue to shape Dalit representation. The study concludes that effective mainstreaming requires stronger needs assessment, inclusive planning, adequate institutional support, meaningful participation, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure equitable and substantive Dalit representation in development programs.

Keywords: Dalit; caste discrimination; mainstreaming; representation; social inclusion; participation; community development; Nepal; social work

INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion has become a central principle of Nepal's democratic and development agenda. Nepal's Constitution explicitly recognizes Dalit rights, including proportional inclusive participation in state bodies and special measures for empowerment, representation and participation in employment, as well as scholarship and educational provisions (Government of Nepal, 2015). These constitutional commitments sit alongside affirmative action, targeted development programmes and local-government structures intended to increase participation of historically excluded communities. However, the existence of an inclusion policy does not automatically guarantee that marginalized citizens can access programmes, participate equally or exercise decision-making power. The distinction between institutional commitment and lived participation is therefore central to assessing the effectiveness of mainstreaming.

Dalits occupy a historically disadvantaged position within Nepal's caste hierarchy. Their exclusion has operated across social, educational, economic, political and institutional domains, and historical caste relations continue to shape access to resources and public institutions. The World Bank's analysis of caste and ethnic exclusion documented persistent disparities in education, assets, income and representation in structures of

power (World Bank, 2006). More recent scholarship likewise finds that caste hierarchy and discrimination remain important determinants of Dalit socioeconomic and political inequality in Nepal (Bishwakarma, 2017). These conditions make substantive participation not merely formal eligibility an important indicator of whether inclusion policies are producing social justice.

The present study focuses on the distinction between formal inclusion and substantive representation. Mainstreaming is understood here not simply as targeting Dalits as beneficiaries, but as creating opportunities for them to participate in the institutions and processes through which development priorities, resources and decisions are determined. This distinction is important because a person may know about a program but be unable to access it; may be present on a committee but lack influence; or may receive a development input without having participated in deciding how it should be used.

The thesis on which this article is based conceptualizes mainstreaming through policy and legal frameworks, capacity development, economic empowerment, community-based development, and monitoring and evaluation. The empirical focus is Nagarjun Municipality Ward 7, Kathmandu, where the study examined awareness, access and participation across several mechanisms including reservation, scholarships, Dalit development programs, skills training, awareness programs, political participation, monitoring and evaluation, and community-based organizations.

The study is particularly relevant to social work because the profession is concerned not only with service delivery but also with empowerment, participation, advocacy, community organization, human rights and structural change. The IFSW global definition places social justice, human rights, empowerment and engagement with people and structures at the centre of social work (IFSW, 2014). The findings therefore provide a localized case through which to consider how social workers and local institutions can strengthen substantive rather than symbolic representation.

The study addresses two questions: (1) What is the status and extent of Dalit representation in mainstreaming programs in Nagarjun-7? and (2) What factors contribute to the under-representation of Dalits in development programs?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dalit Inclusion, Social Exclusion and Mainstreaming

The literature on Dalit inclusion in Nepal shows that exclusion cannot be understood only in terms of individual poverty or the formal absence of rights. (Kabeer, 2000) explains social exclusion as a process through which people experience unequal access to social, economic and institutional resources. In the Nepali context, caste remains an important structure through which such unequal access is reproduced. The (World Bank, 2006) documented persistent disparities in education, assets, income and representation in structures of power, while (Bishwakarma, 2017) links caste hierarchy and discrimination with continuing Dalit political inequality. These perspectives establish the broader context for examining representation in mainstreaming programs: the existence of a policy opportunity does not necessarily mean that marginalized citizens possess the resources, information or institutional power required to use that opportunity.

The literature further suggests that educational and socioeconomic disadvantage accumulates across the life course. (Khanal, 2014, 2015) demonstrates that Dalit children's educational experiences are shaped by the interaction of school conditions, family circumstances, resources, policy implementation and social attitudes. This is relevant to affirmative-action mechanisms because later opportunities, such as reserved employment, depend partly on earlier access to education and preparation. Sen's (1999) capability perspective similarly distinguishes between formal opportunities and the substantive freedom to convert those opportunities into valued outcomes. Thus, a reservation policy may exist in law while its practical reach remains limited for citizens who face cumulative educational, economic and informational barriers.

Mainstreaming should therefore be distinguished from a narrow beneficiary-oriented approach. The thesis describes national mainstreaming programs through policy and legal frameworks, capacity development, economic empowerment, community-based development and monitoring and evaluation. The same broad

dimensions are important for a journal analysis because they allow representation to be assessed across the program cycle rather than only through beneficiary counts. The objective is not simply to establish whether Dalits are included in a program, but whether they can identify needs, access resources, participate in implementation, assume organizational roles, monitor activities and influence decisions. This understanding is consistent with the argument of (Arnstein, 1969) that participation is fundamentally related to the distribution of power, and with (Fraser, 1998) emphasis on redistribution, recognition and participatory parity.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies reviewed in the thesis indicate that Dalit exclusion persists across education, employment, political participation, livelihoods and local development. (Sunar et al., 2015) documented continuing human-rights and socioeconomic disadvantages affecting Dalit communities, while (Khanal, 2020) highlights persistent socioeconomic inequalities. These studies are important because they show that representation in development programs takes place within a wider structure of unequal access to income, education, services and resources. Mainstreaming initiatives therefore operate in an environment where the starting conditions of Dalit and non-Dalit citizens are not equal.

Research on political and institutional representation similarly suggests that numerical presence does not automatically produce substantive influence. (Bishwakarma, 2016, 2017) examines Dalit political inequality and representation and shows the continuing importance of caste-based structures in political participation. (Haug, Aasland, and Dahal, 2009) identify socioeconomic and political barriers that shape participation and social inclusion in Nepal. (Ramtel et al., 2022) also draw attention to the continuing challenges surrounding Dalit political representation. Together, these studies support an assessment of representation that moves beyond counting representatives and asks whether participation provides meaningful access to decision-making processes.

The literature on affirmative action provides a further basis for examining the gap between policy and practice. (Sharma, 2021) discusses reservation policies as an instrument of affirmative action and social inclusion, while (Siwakoti, 2021) questions whether reservation for Dalits in civil service is sufficient to produce effective inclusion. (Bhul, 2024) similarly reports that affirmative-action arrangements have produced representational gains while important inequalities in empowerment and active participation remain. (Sunam, Pariyar, and Shrestha, 2022) argue that affirmative action can contribute to representative institutions when inclusion is understood as a mechanism of social justice rather than as a narrow numerical quota. The implication for the present study is that awareness of reservation or formal eligibility should not be treated as equivalent to actual access or influence.

Empirical work also points to the role of community participation and local development. (Bishwakarma and Pasa, 2020) discuss Dalit mainstreaming in rural development as an alternative approach to addressing poverty, while (Sahi, 2017) examines how Dalit communities make sense of development in rural Nepal. (Linda, 1989) emphasizes community participation and the relevance of local participation in development processes. (Thapa, 2019) identifies skill development as a potential mechanism for Dalit empowerment, but the thesis evidence shows that training may have limited effects when outreach, resources and program design do not respond to specific barriers. (Kumar and Sharma, 2022) similarly discuss Dalit empowerment programs in Nepal in relation to progress and continuing challenges.

The empirical literature also indicates that local institutions may provide spaces for more direct participation. The thesis reports that community-based organizations, particularly consumer committees, created opportunities for Dalit participants to hold organizational positions and exercise leadership. This finding is consistent with participatory development literature, which treats local knowledge, collective action and decision-making as important dimensions of empowerment (Chambers, 1997; Freire, 1970). At the same time, the thesis findings show a sharp weakness in monitoring and evaluation: nine Dalit respondents reported no participation in this stage. The contrast suggests that participation may be stronger in visible community structures while remaining weak in institutional accountability processes.

Overall, the empirical literature presents a mixed picture. Mainstreaming and affirmative-action programs have expanded formal opportunities, improved awareness and, in some cases, strengthened leadership, skills, networking and access to community institutions. However, poverty, limited education, restricted information, caste discrimination, weak institutional support and unequal access to decision-making continue to constrain substantive representation. The literature therefore supports a distinction between formal inclusion, access, participation and decision-making power.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: the Dumontian approach to caste hierarchy, the participatory approach to development, and the anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive perspective. These approaches are used together because the problem of Dalit representation involves three interconnected questions: how caste hierarchy structures social relations; whether affected communities are given meaningful opportunities to participate; and how institutional power and discriminatory practices reproduce unequal outcomes. The combination provides a framework for interpreting both the structural barriers and the possibilities for empowerment identified in Nagarjun-7.

Dumontian Approach

Dumont's (1966) analysis of caste in *Homo Hierarchicus* emphasizes hierarchy, status differentiation and the cultural organization of social positions. The thesis applies this approach to understand how historically embedded ideas of purity, pollution, inherited status and occupation can continue to shape everyday relationships and institutional behaviour. (Subedi, 2013) similarly discusses caste as a social structure with implications for hierarchy and social organization. From this perspective, under-representation cannot be interpreted only as an individual failure to participate; it can also reflect social expectations and institutional practices developed within a historically unequal caste order.

The Dumontian approach is particularly useful for interpreting the difference between formal equality and lived equality. Legal and policy reforms may prohibit caste discrimination, yet informal attitudes and unequal status relations may continue to affect who receives information, who is trusted with leadership, whose knowledge is considered legitimate and who is able to enter decision-making spaces. The framework therefore helps explain why mainstreaming programs may coexist with continuing exclusion. At the same time, the present study does not treat caste hierarchy as fixed or inevitable. Education, collective organization, political participation and institutional reform can challenge inherited status relations.

Participatory Approach

Participatory theory views development as a process in which people affected by programs should have meaningful opportunities to define needs, identify priorities, contribute local knowledge, implement activities, monitor progress and evaluate outcomes. The thesis connects participatory development with (Freire's, 1970) emphasis on dialogue and critical consciousness, while (Chambers, 1997) argues for development practices that take the realities and knowledge of marginalized people seriously. (Diemer et al., 2016) further connect critical consciousness with the capacity to understand and respond to marginalization and oppression.

Applied to Dalit representation, the participatory approach requires more than attendance or consultation. Meaningful participation involves roles, voice, responsibility and influence over resources and decisions. This perspective directly informs the present study's attention to consumer committees, political participation, monitoring and evaluation, and other community-based organizations. It also provides a basis for interpreting leadership positions in consumer committees as potentially stronger forms of participation than simply receiving program information. The framework therefore, asks whether Dalit participation changes what programs do, rather than only whether Dalits are present.

Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Perspective

The anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive perspective directs attention to structural inequality, unequal power relations and institutional practices that reproduce disadvantage. Rather than locating exclusion only in

individual prejudice, the perspective asks who controls resources, whose knowledge is recognized, who defines program priorities, and whether institutional procedures create unequal opportunities. The thesis applies this perspective to Dalit representation by emphasizing inclusive policies, affirmative action, access to resources and active participation in decision-making. (Sharma, 2020) Similarly frames anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive perspectives as relevant to policy implementation.

For the present study, this framework is especially important because formal representation can remain symbolic if representatives lack information, resources, institutional authority or opportunities to influence decisions. It therefore shifts the analytical focus from Dalits as passive recipients of services to Dalits as rights-holders, decision-makers and partners in institutional change. The perspective also helps interpret barriers reported in Nagarjun-7 poverty, limited education, inadequate institutional support, restricted opportunities and caste-based discrimination as interconnected rather than isolated problems.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that Dalit exclusion in Nepal is multidimensional and that mainstreaming requires more than formal policy recognition. The Dumontian perspective explains the persistence of hierarchical social relations; participatory theory explains why voice, collective action and decision-making matter; and the anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive perspective highlights institutional power and structural barriers. Empirical studies have separately examined caste discrimination, education, socioeconomic inequality, affirmative action, political representation, skill development and Dalit empowerment. However, comparatively less attention has been given to how these dimensions operate together within a single local mainstreaming environment and, particularly, to the distinction among awareness, access, participation, decision-making power and empowerment.

The present study addresses this gap through a localized analysis of Nagarjun Municipality Ward 7. It examines several mainstreaming mechanisms together including reservation, scholarships, Dalit development programs, skills development, awareness activities, political participation, monitoring and evaluation, and community-based organizations. The study consequently moves from the question of whether inclusion mechanisms exist to the more substantive questions of whether Dalits can reach them, participate in them and influence the decisions and outcomes associated with them. This provides a thesis-informed but journal-appropriate analytical foundation for assessing substantive Dalit representation.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and setting

The study employed a mixed-method descriptive design within an interpretive orientation. Quantitative information was used to describe patterns of awareness, access and participation, while qualitative evidence was used to understand participants' experiences and interpretations. The study was conducted in Nagarjun Municipality Ward 7, Kathmandu.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was used. The final respondent group comprised 20 people: 11 Dalit and 9 non-Dalit respondents. Three key informants were also interviewed: a ward secretary, a Dalit representative and a non-Dalit representative. The final article reports the actual field composition rather than the initially intended allocation of 10 Dalit and 10 non-Dalit respondents.

Data collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observation. The questionnaire included closed-ended, multiple-choice and Likert-type questions and was administered using Kobo Collect. Key informant interviews provided institutional and community perspectives, while focus group discussions supported cross-checking of individual responses. Observation was used as supplementary qualitative evidence.

Data analysis

Quantitative responses were summarized using frequencies and percentages. Qualitative material was organized thematically and interpreted in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Given the small purposive sample, the analysis is descriptive and does not claim statistical generalizability or population-level significance.

Ethics

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement before data collection. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Participants could choose not to answer questions or to discontinue participation. Because caste identity and experiences of discrimination can be socially sensitive, the researcher-maintained confidentiality, used participant codes rather than names in the research records and avoided including identifying details in reporting. Key-informant and group discussions were used to contextualize the questionnaire findings rather than to expose individual participants. The ethical approach was therefore guided by respect for dignity, voluntary participation, confidentiality and avoidance of harm. The original thesis materials available for this manuscript do not document a separate institutional review/ethics approval number; the article consequently reports the ethical procedures that are documented rather than implying an approval that cannot be verified.

RESULTS

Respondent profile

The 20 respondents comprised 11 Dalit and 9 non-Dalit participants. Fourteen were male and six were female. Educational backgrounds ranged from literacy/basic education to graduate-level education. The three key informants represented ward administration and Dalit/non-Dalit community perspectives.

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>Caste/community</i>	Dalit	11
<i>Caste/community</i>	Non-Dalit	9
<i>Sex</i>	Male	14
<i>Sex</i>	Female	6
<i>Total respondents</i>		20

Awareness of mainstreaming programs

<i>Program/mechanism</i>	<i>Aware (n)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Government employment reservation</i>	19	95%
<i>Scholarship program</i>	19	95%
<i>Consumer committees/CBOs</i>	19	95%
<i>Dalit development programs</i>	18	90%
<i>Political representation</i>	17	85%

<i>Monitoring and evaluation</i>	14	70%
<i>Vocational/skills development</i>	15	75%
<i>Awareness/sensitization</i>	15	75%
<i>Legal support/advocacy</i>	12	60%
<i>Land reform/distribution</i>	10	50%

Awareness was strongest for employment reservation, scholarships and consumer committees/CBOs. Awareness was lower for legal support and advocacy and particularly low for land reform and distribution. The pattern suggests that information about mainstream programs is not uniformly distributed and that awareness itself should not be treated as evidence of access.

Access to employment reservation

None of the respondents reported access to reservation-based government employment. This is notable because 19 respondents were aware of the policy. The finding illustrates a substantial gap between policy visibility and actual access.

Qualitative evidence suggests that socioeconomic disadvantage may intervene before the point of recruitment. Participants described financial constraints that made higher education difficult and contributed to alternative livelihood decisions. Thus, affirmative employment policies may have limited reach when educational and economic inequalities remain unresolved.

Dalit development programs

Participation in Dalit development programs was mixed. Among Dalit respondents represented in the participation table, some reported substantial participation, more reported partial participation, and some reported no participation. Qualitative responses indicate that programs could improve awareness, livelihood opportunities and knowledge of rights, but material inputs did not always produce sustained benefit when participants faced poverty, illiteracy or inadequate follow-up support.

Vocational and skills development

Eleven respondents reported participation in vocational or skills-development activities. Participants associated training with practical skills, confidence, awareness and livelihood opportunities. However, limited outreach, inadequate resources and insufficiently tailored training were identified as constraints.

Awareness and sensitization

Only seven respondents reported participation in awareness and sensitization programs. Participants who attended described improvements in knowledge, confidence and networking, but qualitative evidence also indicates that repeated awareness activities do not necessarily eliminate caste stereotypes or discriminatory practices.

Political participation

Eleven respondents reported some form of political participation or affiliation. Participants associated political engagement with information, advocacy, leadership, networking and opportunities to influence local priorities. At the same time, the findings indicate that political participation can become dependent on party networks and may be symbolic where representatives lack substantive influence.

Monitoring and evaluation

<i>Participation in monitoring/evaluation</i>	<i>Dalit</i>	<i>Non-Dalit</i>
<i>Active/mostly participating</i>	0	1
<i>Partial/observer</i>	1	6
<i>No participation</i>	9	3
<i>Total</i>	10	10

Monitoring and evaluation represented the largest participation gap. Nine Dalit respondents reported no involvement, compared with three non-Dalit respondents. This is particularly important because evaluation is a key mechanism through which beneficiaries can hold programs accountable and influence future design.

Community-based organizations

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Dalit participants</i>	<i>Non-Dalit participants</i>
<i>Community forest</i>	1	1
<i>Drinking-water committee</i>	3	3
<i>Consumer committee</i>	6	7
<i>Women's group</i>	3	2

Community-based organizations provided comparatively strong opportunities for meaningful representation. Six Dalit respondents participated in consumer committees, including one chairperson, one vice-chairperson, one treasurer and three members. Participants associated this involvement with increased dignity, confidence, leadership, networking, advocacy and decision-making.

Perceived accessibility and effectiveness

<i>Accessibility response</i>	<i>Dalit (n=10)</i>	<i>Non-Dalit (n=10)</i>
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	0	0
<i>Disagree</i>	2	1
<i>Neutral</i>	2	8
<i>Agree</i>	6	1
<i>Strongly agree</i>	0	0

Six Dalit respondents agreed that participation was challenging, compared with one non-Dalit respondent. Respondents identified poor economic status, caste-based discrimination, limited opportunities, lack of information and inadequate institutional support as barriers.

<i>Effectiveness response</i>	<i>Dalit (n=10)</i>	<i>Non-Dalit (n=10)</i>
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	0	0
<i>Disagree</i>	0	0
<i>Neutral</i>	2	2

Agree	8	7
Strongly agree	0	1

Sixteen respondents agreed or strongly agreed that mainstreaming programs were effective. Participants associated effectiveness with empowerment, leadership, awareness, advocacy, networking, improved social status and more inclusive decision-making. The coexistence of positive effectiveness ratings with substantial access barriers indicates that programs can be valued while still being unevenly accessible.

DISCUSSION

Formal inclusion versus substantive representation

The central finding is that formal inclusion and substantive representation are not synonymous. In Nagarjun-7, awareness of employment reservation, scholarships and community organizations was high, yet none of the respondents reported access to reservation-based government employment and participation was particularly weak in monitoring and evaluation. This pattern is consistent with research showing that Nepal's inclusion policies have generated institutional gains while leaving important inequalities in empowerment and decision-making (Bishwakarma, 2017; Siwakoti, 2021; Bhul, 2024). The finding should not be interpreted as evidence that affirmative action is ineffective. Rather, it demonstrates that a policy instrument can be visible and formally available while remaining difficult to convert into a substantive opportunity for people experiencing cumulative disadvantage.

The findings therefore support a distinction among presence, participation and power. Numerical inclusion may be a necessary first step, but substantive representation requires authority to influence decisions, access resources, shape implementation and hold institutions accountable. (Arnstein's, 1969) participation framework is useful here: informing and consultation may increase visibility without redistributing decision-making power. In the Nagarjun-7 context, the stronger experience reported in community organizations compared with monitoring and evaluation suggests that participation becomes more meaningful when people occupy defined roles and have opportunities to deliberate over local priorities. (Fraser's, 1998) framework further indicates that recognition without redistribution and participatory parity is insufficient for justice. For Dalit mainstreaming, therefore, the policy question is not only 'Are Dalits included?' but also 'On what terms, with what resources, and with how much influence?'

Poverty and cumulative disadvantage

Poverty emerged not as an isolated barrier but as a mechanism that interacts with education, information and participation. Limited economic resources can restrict higher education, reduce opportunities for skills development, limit time for voluntary participation and increase dependence on informal networks. The result is cumulative disadvantage: constraints at one stage reduce the capacity to benefit from opportunities at the next. This interpretation is consistent with (Kabeer's, 2000) account of exclusion and (Sen's, 1999) capability perspective, both of which caution against equating formal access with substantive freedom to achieve valued outcomes. In the present case, the absence of reported access to reserved government employment despite high awareness of the policy illustrates this conversion problem. A reservation policy can open a formal route, but its effectiveness depends partly on educational preparation, information, economic capacity and the ability to compete for and complete the relevant recruitment pathway.

Education and affirmative action

The findings suggest that reservation policies should be linked to earlier educational support. Where Dalit students cannot reach or complete higher education, employment reservation has limited practical reach. Scholarship programmes can be more transformative when accompanied by sustained academic support, mentoring, information about eligibility and application procedures, and assistance with transitions into higher education and employment. (Khanal, 2014, 2015) demonstrates that educational inclusion is shaped by interacting school, family, resource and social factors, while (Siwakoti, 2021) and (Bhul, 2024) show that the

existence of reservation does not by itself eliminate structural inequalities in state employment. The implication is that affirmative action should be conceived as a continuum of support rather than as a single recruitment-stage intervention.

Community organizations as spaces of power

The strongest evidence of substantive participation came from community-based organizations, especially consumer committees. Six Dalit respondents reported participation in consumer committees, including leadership roles as chairperson, vice-chairperson and treasurer. Participants associated this involvement with dignity, confidence, leadership, networking, advocacy and decision-making. These findings support participatory theory because participation here was not limited to receiving benefits; it involved defined responsibilities and opportunities to influence collective affairs. (Chambers, 1997) emphasizes the importance of shifting development practice toward the realities and knowledge of people who are usually placed at the margins, while (Freire, 1970) highlights dialogue and critical participation as foundations for empowerment. The Nagarjun-7 evidence suggests that community organizations can provide precisely such intermediate spaces, although their effectiveness depends on whether leadership roles carry real authority rather than symbolic recognition.

Monitoring and evaluation as a missing dimension

The low participation of Dalits in monitoring and evaluation is a major accountability concern. Nine Dalit respondents reported no participation in monitoring and evaluation, compared with three non-Dalit respondents. This gap matters because monitoring and evaluation determine what counts as success, whose experiences are documented, and whether implementation problems lead to corrective action. When intended beneficiaries are absent from these processes, programmes may appear effective through administrative indicators while overlooking barriers that are visible only at community level. (Chambers, 1997) argues for development processes that value local realities and learning, and participatory approaches similarly emphasize feedback and collective reflection. Dalit representation in monitoring and evaluation should therefore be institutionalized as part of programme governance, with community-defined indicators and feedback mechanisms that can influence subsequent planning and budgeting.

Political participation and tokenism

Political participation provided opportunities for leadership, advocacy, networking and access to information, but the findings also indicate that political participation can be dependent on party and interpersonal networks. This creates a risk that representation becomes symbolic when individuals are present without sufficient autonomy, information or institutional authority. (Bishwakarma, 2017) identifies caste hierarchy and discrimination as continuing determinants of Dalit political inequality, while the present study extends that concern to the local programme environment. Future assessments should therefore distinguish between descriptive representation (who is present), participatory representation (who takes part), and substantive representation (who can influence decisions and outcomes). This distinction is especially important at the local level, where informal relationships and access to networks can strongly shape who learns about opportunities, who is selected, and whose priorities receive institutional attention.

This interpretation is consistent with scholarship on Dalit political inequality, which identifies deeply rooted caste hierarchy and discrimination as continuing determinants of unequal political representation.

THEORETICAL / CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The framework integrates the Dumontian Approach, Participatory Approach, and Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Perspective to analyze Dalit representation in mainstream development programs. The framework links structural caste hierarchy and social exclusion with participation, power relations, institutional barriers, program accessibility, and empowerment.

Conceptual Framework of Dalit Representation in Mainstreaming Programs

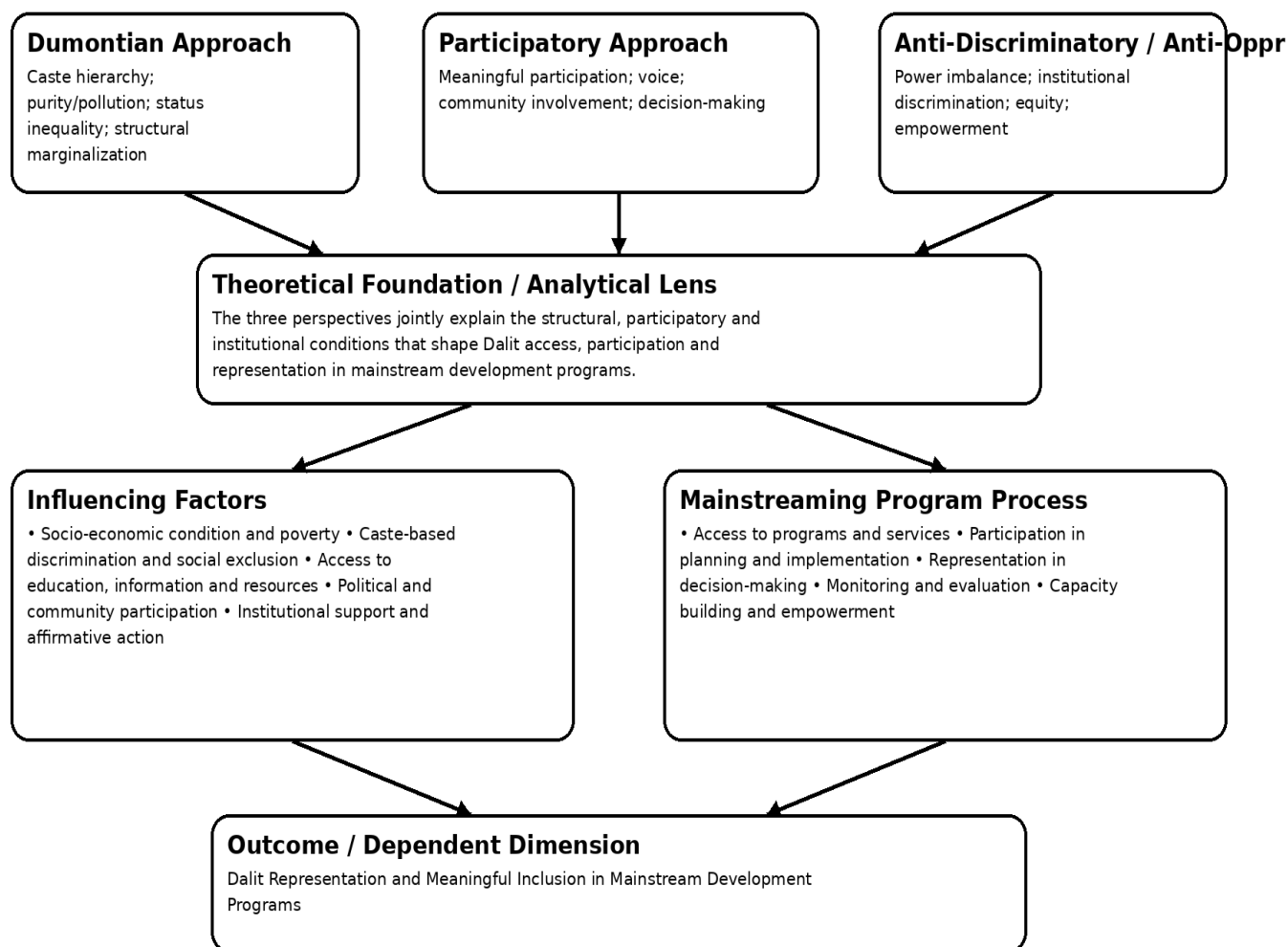


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Developed by the researcher based on the theoretical perspectives and literature reviewed in the study.

Conceptually, the framework assumes that Dalit representation is shaped not only by the existence of mainstreaming programs but also by the structural and institutional conditions that influence access, participation and decision-making. The Dumontian perspective helps explain caste hierarchy and status-based exclusion; the Participatory Approach emphasizes voice and meaningful involvement; and the Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Perspective focuses on power imbalance, institutional discrimination and empowerment. Together, these perspectives provide the analytical basis for examining how socio-economic conditions, discrimination, access to resources, political/community participation and institutional support influence Dalit inclusion in mainstream programs.

CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTION

The findings suggest a five-stage pathway for evaluating mainstreaming: (1) policy commitment, (2) access, (3) participation, (4) decision-making power, and (5) empowerment. The pathway is proposed as an analytical contribution of the study rather than as a validated scale. It provides a practical way to trace where inclusion succeeds and where it breaks down.

Policy commitment can create a right without ensuring access. Access can provide a service without ensuring participation. Participation can provide a seat without decision-making power. Decision-making power, when genuinely exercised and supported by resources, is more likely to produce empowerment. The distinction is

consistent with Arnstein's (1969) emphasis on the relationship between participation and power and with Sen's (1999) focus on the conversion of formal opportunities into substantive freedoms. It also complements Fraser's (1998) argument that justice requires participation on terms of parity rather than recognition alone. In this sense, mainstreaming can be understood as a progression from institutional promise to lived capability and collective influence.

The study therefore contributes a localized interpretation of mainstreaming in which representation is assessed across the full programme cycle rather than through beneficiary counts alone. The framework directs attention to four linked questions: whether a right or programme exists; whether intended beneficiaries can reach it; whether they participate meaningfully; and whether participation changes decisions, resource allocation and institutional accountability. Its value for social work and local governance lies in shifting evaluation from counting beneficiaries toward examining power, agency and institutional responsiveness. Because the framework emerges from a small case study, it should be tested and refined through comparative research in other wards and municipalities rather than treated as a universally validated model.

Stage	Core question	Indicator of substantive inclusion
1. Policy commitment	Does an explicit legal/policy commitment exist?	Rights, targets, budgets and institutional mandates are stated.
2. Access	Can Dalit citizens realistically reach the opportunity?	Information, eligibility, education, affordability and outreach barriers are addressed.
3. Participation	Do Dalits participate beyond receiving benefits?	Attendance, membership, roles, consultation and collective action are evident.
4. Decision-making power	Can Dalit participants influence priorities and resources?	Leadership, decision authority, agenda-setting and accountability roles are present.
5. Empowerment	Does participation strengthen agency and institutional responsiveness?	Greater confidence, advocacy, leadership, collective voice and institutional responsiveness are observed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

At the micro level, social workers can support Dalit individuals and families to identify and navigate scholarships, employment opportunities, social protection, legal remedies and livelihood programmes. The findings show that information alone is not sufficient; therefore, social workers can combine rights-based information with individualized case support, mentoring, referral, documentation assistance and follow-up. Such practice is consistent with the social work mandate to help people access rights and resources while addressing structural barriers (IFSW, 2014).

At the mezzo level, social workers can strengthen Dalit-led groups, women's groups, consumer committees and other community-based organizations as democratic spaces for leadership and collective action. Rather than organizing participation on behalf of Dalit communities, practitioners should facilitate participation with communities and support locally defined priorities. This includes leadership development, facilitation skills, conflict-sensitive dialogue, collective advocacy, community mapping, participatory needs assessment and participatory monitoring. The comparatively stronger role of consumer committees in the present study suggests that existing community institutions can be important entry points for this work.

At the macro level, social workers can engage in policy advocacy, institutional accountability, anti-discrimination initiatives, programme monitoring, research and evidence-based policy reform. The profession's commitment to social justice and human rights makes it particularly relevant to challenging institutional practices that reproduce exclusion (IFSW, 2014; IASSW & IFSW, 2018). Social workers can help local governments establish inclusion indicators, review participation data by caste and gender, facilitate social audits, document barriers, and bring community evidence into planning and budgeting processes. Importantly, the role should not be reduced to service brokerage: social work can also function as a bridge between lived experience and institutional reform. In the context of Nagarjun-7, this means working simultaneously with individuals, community organizations and local government so that empowerment at one level reinforces

accountability at the others.

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are organized around the main implications of the findings and are directed to policy makers and local government institutions, social work and development practitioners, Dalit community organizations and community members, and future researchers. The emphasis is on moving from formal inclusion toward meaningful participation, decision-making power and empowerment across the full programme cycle.

A. Recommendations for Policy Makers and Local Government

1. Institutionalize Dalit participation across the entire local programme cycle. Municipal and ward authorities should ensure meaningful Dalit representation in needs assessment, priority setting, annual planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Representation should involve defined responsibilities, timely access to information and opportunities to influence decisions.
2. Strengthen the education-to-employment pathway for affirmative action. Employment reservation should be supported by sustained scholarships, academic mentoring, career counselling, preparatory support for competitive examinations, digital access and clear information about recruitment procedures so that socioeconomic and educational disadvantage does not prevent potential beneficiaries from reaching employment opportunities.
3. Improve transparency, outreach and accountability in programme implementation. Eligibility criteria, selection procedures, beneficiary information and programme budgets should be communicated through accessible local channels, with simple grievance and referral mechanisms so that access does not depend primarily on political affiliation, personal connections or informal gatekeepers.
4. Institutionalize participatory monitoring and evaluation. Dalit representatives should be included in monitoring committees, programme reviews and social audits. Monitoring should include community-defined indicators on access, participation, discrimination, benefit distribution and satisfaction, with findings linked to subsequent planning and budgeting.
5. Strengthen anti-discrimination measures beyond one-time sensitization. Local institutions should address caste stereotypes, discriminatory institutional practices and everyday exclusion through sustained dialogue, case-based learning, institutional accountability and accessible mechanisms for reporting and responding to discrimination.

B. Recommendations for Social Work and Development Practitioners

6. Combine rights-based information with practical support. Social workers and development practitioners should provide mentoring, referral, documentation assistance and follow-up so that awareness of scholarships, employment, social protection, legal remedies and livelihood programmes can be converted into actual access.
7. Strengthen Dalit-led and community-based organizations as spaces for leadership and collective action. Practitioners should facilitate participatory needs assessment, leadership development, community mapping, advocacy, conflict-sensitive dialogue and participatory monitoring rather than organizing participation on behalf of communities.
8. Promote inclusive leadership among Dalit women, youth and less-represented community members. Leadership development, public-speaking opportunities, mentoring, committee-management training and inclusive community forums can broaden the pool of people able to represent community priorities.

C. Recommendations for Dalit Community and Community Organizations

9. Strengthen collective participation in local planning and accountability. Dalit community members and organizations should actively engage in ward-level planning, budgeting, programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation, using collective forums to communicate priorities and follow up on commitments.

10. Develop community-based information and advocacy mechanisms. Dalit organizations can help disseminate information on scholarships, employment reservation, skills training, legal support, social protection and local programmes, while supporting community members who face barriers in accessing services.

11. Build sustained leadership, documentation and advocacy capacity. Community organizations should encourage leadership among women and younger members, maintain records of programme commitments and participation, and use evidence from community experiences to advocate for transparent and non-discriminatory local governance.

12. Strengthen linkages with existing community institutions. The relatively stronger participation observed in consumer committees indicates that community institutions can provide practical spaces for leadership, networking, advocacy and decision-making. Dalit organizations should use such spaces strategically while remaining attentive to representation, accountability and the risk of elite capture.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHERS

13. Replicate the study across multiple wards and municipalities. Comparative research involving urban and rural settings and different ecological, socioeconomic and political contexts would help determine whether the patterns identified in Nagarjun-7 are locally specific or more widely observed.

14. Examine the proposed five-stage mainstreaming pathway empirically. Future studies should test and refine the pathway of policy commitment, access, participation, decision-making power and empowerment using larger samples and, where appropriate, validated indicators or scales.

15. Use longitudinal and mixed-method research to examine outcomes over time. Future researchers should investigate whether participation in mainstreaming programmes leads to sustained changes in capability, dignity, livelihoods, leadership and social and political inclusion.

16. Examine intersectional dimensions of representation. Further research should give specific attention to differences among Dalit women, youth, people with disabilities, economically disadvantaged households and other groups whose experiences may be shaped by overlapping forms of exclusion.

17. Study institutional processes and implementation gaps in greater depth. Research should examine how information flows, beneficiary selection, budgeting, political networks, administrative practices and monitoring systems influence the conversion of formal inclusion into substantive participation and decision-making power.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted in a single ward of Kathmandu and therefore captures a localized institutional and community context. Dalit experiences may differ across municipalities, rural and urban settings, ecological regions, caste/community configurations and local political environments. Second, the final respondent group was small and purposively selected. The quantitative findings are consequently descriptive and are not intended to provide population estimates or statistical tests of association. Third, several measures rely on participants' self-reports, which may be affected by recall, social desirability or differences in how respondents understood programme participation. This is particularly relevant when discussing caste discrimination and political participation, topics that may carry social sensitivities. Fourth, the study captures participation at one point in time and therefore cannot establish whether programme participation produces long-term changes in livelihood, political influence or social status. Fifth, the article is based on the original thesis and some secondary references have been updated for journal presentation; future work should undertake a systematic review of current national data and policy implementation. Finally, the study does not compare multiple wards or municipalities, which limits its ability to distinguish ward-specific conditions from broader patterns in Nepal. These limitations do not negate the value of the case; rather, they define the study as an in-depth localized analysis and indicate priorities for comparative research.

The findings should therefore be read as an analytically useful case rather than a national estimate. Their principal value lies in showing how formal inclusion mechanisms are experienced at community level and in identifying specific points especially access, monitoring and evaluation, and decision-making where mainstreaming can weaken.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Dalit representation in mainstreaming programmes in Nagarjun-7, Kathmandu, with particular attention to the difference between formal inclusion and substantive participation. The findings show a mixed picture. Awareness of major inclusion mechanisms was relatively high: 19 respondents reported awareness of employment reservation, scholarships and consumer committees/community-based organizations, and 18 reported awareness of Dalit development programmes. Yet awareness did not translate consistently into access or participation. Most notably, none of the respondents reported access to reservation-based government employment, and monitoring and evaluation showed a pronounced participation gap, with nine Dalit respondents reporting no involvement. These findings demonstrate that the existence and visibility of an inclusion mechanism cannot be treated as evidence that the mechanism is substantively accessible.

At the same time, the findings should not be read as a rejection of mainstreaming or affirmative action. Participants identified positive effects associated with skills development, political participation and community organizations, including increased confidence, dignity, leadership, networking, advocacy and opportunities for decision-making. Community-based organizations, especially consumer committees, appeared to provide more immediate spaces for substantive participation than some formal programme mechanisms. The central challenge is therefore not simply to create more programmes but to improve the conditions under which people can enter, participate in and influence those programmes.

The study's conceptual contribution is a five-stage pathway policy commitment, access, participation, decision-making power and empowerment that can be used to examine where inclusion is succeeding and where it is breaking down. This pathway moves evaluation beyond beneficiary counts toward questions of power and agency. It also highlights the need to connect redistribution measures, such as scholarships and employment reservation, with recognition, anti-discrimination and participatory decision-making. The evidence suggests a necessary shift from 'programmes for Dalits' toward 'programmes with Dalits and, where appropriate, programmes led by Dalits.' Such a shift requires sustained investment in education, information, leadership, community organization, transparent local governance, participatory accountability and institutional responses to discrimination.

For social work, the findings reinforce the need to combine direct support with structural advocacy. Social workers can assist individuals in accessing rights and opportunities, strengthen Dalit-led and community-based organizations, facilitate participatory processes, document exclusion, support anti-discrimination work and advocate for institutional accountability. In this sense, social work can help translate formal rights into lived participation by working simultaneously at micro, mezzo and macro levels. Future research should test the proposed mainstreaming pathway across multiple municipalities and examine whether stronger participation in decision-making leads to sustained improvements in capability, dignity, livelihoods and social and political inclusion.

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