

“When I tell them my caste, silence descends”: Caste-based Discrimination among the Nepali Diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, USA

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Abstract

Recent cases of caste-based workplace discrimination in Silicon Valley in the United States (US) have highlighted the practice of caste-based discrimination in the San Francisco (SF) Bay Area. Most documentation of caste-based discrimination in diaspora populations in the US has focused on the Indian diaspora, omitting the perspectives of Dalits from other South Asian countries. This study investigated caste-based discrimination among the Nepali diaspora living in the SF Bay Area. Twenty-seven Nepali-American Dalits in the SF Bay Area participated in qualitative research on their experiences of caste-based discrimination. Aligned with findings from studies of Dalit diaspora members in other settings, the research found that Dalits faced social exclusion, workplace prejudice, microaggressions, and housing bias in the Nepali diaspora in the SF Bay Area. To preempt or avoid discrimination, some Dalits hid their caste, and many did not feel comfortable taking action regarding caste-based discrimination because of the absence of caste as a protected category in their workplaces and in local government policies. Caste-based discrimination affected the Dalits' mental health as well. The findings highlight the need for policy interventions for Dalits living in the SF Bay Area and facing caste-based discrimination within their diaspora communities.

Keywords

Caste, Caste-based discrimination, Casteism, Dalit, Nepali Diaspora, San Francisco Bay Area, Dalit Oppression

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Literature Review

With migration from South Asia, the caste system also traveled to different parts of the world (Sam, 2017). Adur and Narayan highlight the unique experiences of Dalits in the South Asian diaspora, describing them as “a diaspora within a diaspora” (2017, p. 244). The caste system creates layers of heterogeneous experiences within the South Asian diaspora, where Dalits, besides dealing with racism in the host country, also have to negotiate caste-based discrimination within their ethnic communities, wearing caste hierarchies “as an albatross around their necks, waiting to free themselves from its oppressive weight” (Adur & Narayan, 2017, p. 259). While incidents of caste-based discrimination against Indian-American Dalits have been widely covered by US media outlets, reports of caste-based discrimination in other South Asian communities in the US, including among Nepalis, are much less visible.

Research on caste in the Nepali diaspora is scant, with only a few studies having been conducted on the caste-related experiences of the Nepali diaspora—all were outside the US. Studies from Australia and Britain reveal the overrepresentation of dominant hill castes (Brahmins and Chhetris) in the diaspora and the near cultural homogeneity of these diaspora groups (Pariyar, 2018; Pariyar, 2019). Pariyar noted that dominant castes tended to inflict psychological wounds with their words, engineer social exclusion, or manifest unsafe spaces, which in themselves are forms of violence (2019).

Pariyar (2020) noted that Nepali dominant castes in Britain observed the concepts of purity and pollution as they relate to caste, quoting the dominant caste refrain: “if we lose our money and property, we have lost something; if we lose our identity, we have lost everything” (Pariyar, 2020, p. 617). In his research, Nepali Dalit Gurkhas in Britain reported that dominant caste people barred Dalit Gurkhas and their children from entering certain areas of the home, particularly kitchens and prayer rooms (2020). In his ethnographic work, caste discrimination was also observed during housing transactions, renting, and during marriages (2020). Nepali Dalits in his study described experiencing caste slurs and caste-based social exclusion (2020). There were also instances of diaspora dominant caste children taunting Dalit children by calling them ‘untouchables.’ Pariyar reports that experiences of casteism caused considerable “distress, frustration, and anger” among the victims (Pariyar, 2018, p. 414).

Experiences with caste discrimination can impact victims’ mental health. While we were unable to find any research on the mental health impacts of caste discrimination in the Nepali Dalit diaspora in the US, studies from other contexts are indicative of such harmful effects. Using a mixed-methods approach, Kiang et al. examined connections between social status, identity, and mental health among 295 adolescents in Nepal (2020). Analyzing quantitative surveys and qualitative ethnographic data, they found that mental health was associated with social status, with Dalit adolescents reporting the highest level of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and self-esteem compared to their moderate and dominant caste friends (2020). French

(2020) found that Dalits in Nepal have “a greater prevalence of depression and anxiety when compared with high castes,” identifying the possible causes as “religious and supernatural teachings, culture, caste, and a lack of education” (French, 2020, p. 1). In a similar vein, Gupta and Coffey found that in India, Scheduled Caste (including Dalit) and Muslim individuals self-reported poorer mental health compared to dominant caste Hindus, even after controlling for education and asset gaps (2020). To our knowledge, this is the first study examining the mental health impacts of caste discrimination among the Nepali diaspora in the US.

Methods

This study conducted qualitative ethnographic research with Nepali Dalits living in the SF Bay Area to investigate if and to what extent caste-based discrimination exists among the local Nepali diaspora. The study further explored if the nature of caste-based discrimination differs based on the setting as well as various other themes including identity concealment to avoid discrimination and the impact of caste-based discrimination on Nepali Dalits’ mental health.

In order to collect primary data from Nepali Dalits living in the SF Bay Area, we employed semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group discussion. These data collection strategies were chosen because of their particular appropriateness in studies of identity and power dynamics (Chiu & Knight, 2011), including among Dalit Nepalis in other diaspora settings (Pariyar, 2020).

The research investigated the following questions:

- 1) Do Nepali Dalits experience caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay area?
- 2) Does caste-based discrimination differ based on the setting in which it occurs, such as temple, workplace, community, household, etc.?
- 3) How do Nepali Dalits deal with caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay Area?
 - a) Do they conceal their identity, as some studies have shown?
 - b) How do identity concealment and other discrimination-defying strategies affect Dalits’ mental health?
 - c) Does identity disclosure lead to social, professional, or economic exclusion within the Nepali community? If so, how does the exclusion affect their standard of living?

The questions covered different aspects of Dalits’ lives, highlighting a comprehensive picture of their interactions within their diasporic community.

Participant Recruitment

The target participants for this study were Nepali Dalits living in the SF Bay area. The lead author has been an active member of the Nepali diasporic community and was able to recruit participants through personal connections, as well as through diasporic organizations including Nepal American Pariyar Association (NAPA). Flyers for the research were also shared on social media. Nepali Dalits were asked to anonymously provide their preferred contact information via an online survey if interested in participating in the study. The lead author then connected with participants via the contact information they had provided.

Sample

Twenty-seven SF Bay Area-based Nepali Dalits participated in this study. Ten Dalits (eight men and two women) participated in a focus group discussion, while the remaining seventeen (eleven men and six women) chose instead to participate in individual interviews. Eight out of the twenty-seven participants were women, and the remaining nineteen participants were men. All Dalits participating in this research originated from the Nepalese Hills. A consent form was read and agreed to by each participant before the start of the focus group discussion and individual interviews. This study received ethical approval from the California State University East Bay Institutional Review Board (Protocol #: CSUEB-IRB-2020-241).

Data Collection

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all data collection was conducted online, with Zoom video conferencing and phone calls used to communicate with participants. For the focus group, Zoom was used, with each participant receiving a unique Zoom ID and a password to log in for the meeting. To maximize privacy during the focus group discussion, participants were requested to change their displayed names and turn off their videos prior to the start of the session. The focus group discussion lasted for two hours and fifty minutes. Each individual interview lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour.

The lead researcher, who facilitated the focus group and interviews, comes from a Nepali Dalit background, which made it easier for him to build rapport with and establish trust among participants. The facilitator used semi-structured focus group and individual interview guides to facilitate the discussion and interviews. Because most of these questions were on sensitive topics regarding discrimination, participants were informed during the recruitment process of the discussion/interview themes, and they were informed that they were free to not answer any questions if they were not comfortable doing so.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the focus group discussion and individual interviews were translated and transcribed into English and then qualitatively coded using a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017) to answer the study's research questions. A summary of the main findings follows.

Findings

Twenty-seven Dalits residing in the SF Bay Area participated in a focus group discussion or individual interviews. They all came from the hilly region of Nepal and had lived in the United States for at least one year. All participants reported experiencing caste-based discrimination in Nepal, and twenty-four out of twenty-seven reported having experienced caste-based discrimination within the Nepali diaspora in the United States.

The three participants who did not report experiencing caste-based discrimination in the United States also reported being disconnected from the dominant caste Nepali diaspora community and were therefore protected from the possibility of caste-based discrimination. However, they reported hearing of caste-based discrimination against their Dalit friends who were more integrated into the Nepali diaspora. The participants reported experiencing caste-based discrimination during conversations, in housing, at the workplace, from older members of the Nepali diaspora, at religious gatherings, and when pursuing romantic relationships. Despite caste-based discrimination, some participants have chosen to live openly as Dalits among the diaspora, while others continue to conceal their caste identity. Many participants described ways that caste-based discrimination in the Nepali SF Bay Area diaspora has affected their mental health and well-being.

Experiences of Discrimination

“I have experienced discrimination in Nepal, India, the U.S., wherever there is a Nepali diaspora,” one male participant said, highlighting the ubiquity of caste-based discrimination. Below, we outline the six main types of caste-based discrimination described by participants.

Casteism in Conversation

Participants described dominant caste Nepalis obsessively inquiring about individuals’ caste identity, which they then used to rank people. One male participant said, “when I tell them [dominant caste Nepalis] my caste, silence descends, which makes me uncomfortable.” Participants also pointed to the ubiquitous use of slurs. One female participant said, “they would pick on my traits such as skin color or eating habits and humiliate me, saying I looked like *Damai* [the name of a sub-caste of Dalits in the hilly regions of Nepal whose occupations include tailoring and playing music] or a *Kami* [another sub-caste of Dalits with occupations such as blacksmith].” Mitra Pariyar found similar caste-targeted slurs in England (2019). Another female participant described how a dominant caste man, upon learning that she was a Dalit, diminished the respect level of the pronoun he used to address her. The man changed the pronoun from “*Tapai*” [higher-level, used for elders, strangers] to “*Timi*” [mid-level, friends] after learning of her caste, signifying a decrease in his respect for her.

Participants reported that dominant caste Nepalis perceived Dalits as destitute with no future. One male participant shared that, upon meeting a successful Dalit, “dominant caste people would gasp, surprised that Dalits can also be successful.” A male participant concurred and shared how his US-based dominant caste friends would showcase their superior status by “talking about their possessions, power, and people [who were in high posts in Nepal] to show Dalits their positions.” Participants said that dominant castes would discount successful Dalits’ merits, with one male participant giving as an example how dominant caste Nepalis sarcastically said of him, “despite being a Dalit, he is a good singer.”

Discrimination in Housing

Nearly all participants reported personally experiencing or knowing other Nepali Dalits who faced caste-based discrimination in housing in the SF Bay Area. One male participant shared that his Dalit friend was evicted when his roommates learned of his caste. “The roommates’ behavior instantly changed,” he shared. A woman participant shared that she was also evicted when the dominant caste house owner learned of her Dalit identity, which she had concealed when arranging the housing for fear of discrimination. In another instance, a woman participant reported an instance of a dominant caste woman refusing to rent a room within her house, saying, “I think it happened because of caste. She did not want to live with a Pariyar [a Nepali Dalit surname] family.”

Discrimination at Work

Participants also shared incidents of workplace caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay Area. “My workplace canceled a planned picnic when they discovered [I] was a Dalit,” one male participant shared. Another male participant shared that his colleagues socially excluded him at the workplace after discovering that he was a Dalit. He complained that “solidarity against caste-based discrimination does not translate to policy changes at the workplace,” and his dominant caste coworkers who had previously stated their opposition to the caste system still remained silent after his caste identity was revealed and he was impacted by caste-based discrimination. A female participant noted that in organizations with Indian and Nepali employees and non-South Asian bosses, caste-based discrimination occurred amongst the South Asian workers without the boss’s full understanding, stating, “discrimination is common between workers and not between the worker and the boss.” Participants recounted how, at their jobs, casteist slurs were common, such as “*sano jaat ko sanai buddhi* [small caste, small brain].” Caste-based discrimination affected participants’ prospective employment. A Dalit photographer said dominant caste people would not hire him for family shoots. “I feel inferior around them,” he said, explaining his reluctance to work with the Nepali diaspora after experiencing these instances of caste-based discrimination.

Intergenerational Discrimination

Participants reported ways in which dominant caste young adults in the Nepali diaspora who acted friendly with Dalits would change their behavior when their older parents were visiting. One male participant said “When their parents were not around, dominant caste friends would come and mingle with us. However, when their parents arrived, they would give excuses to not come to our place.” If the dominant caste young adults were to invite Dalits over while their parents were visiting, they would ensure their parents ate first.

The concept of purity and pollution was a recurrent theme in the interviews and the focus group. A male Dalit participant shared an incident of caste-based discrimination during a celebration of *Tihar (Diwali)*, saying, “Once when I went to see a [dominant caste] friend and she put a *bhai tika* [colored powder traditionally placed by a sister on

her brother’s head] on my forehead, her mother became angry with her and instructed her to clean the entire house. Her mother made a loud scene saying how her daughter brings ANY people to her home.” The incident demonstrated the reigning purity and pollution binary concept of the caste system in the diaspora, in which close friendships spanning caste boundaries are not accepted. One participant narrated how despite his offering aid to a dominant caste friend whose father had died recently, the friend refused to accept his help because by “tradition” a Dalit’s presence would “pollute” his father’s last rites:

“My upper-caste friend’s father had died in Nepal. I felt sad for him and extended my support and sympathy. However, because I was a Dalit and in his caste’s funeral tradition my presence around him would be considered polluting, he preemptively left our shared apartment to prepare for the rite by himself.”

Discrimination at Religious Gatherings

Caste-based discrimination in religious affairs was common, and each participant had heard of it or personally experienced it. “Dominant caste families have not invited me for a *puja* (worship) ceremony even though they have invited mutual dominant caste friends,” a female participant shared, describing her exclusion from religious events due to her caste. One mother shared an incident where a dominant caste individual prevented her daughter from joining a *Panchakanya* (the league of five girls) for a Hindu festival, even when this exclusion required the ceremony to proceed with an incorrect number of participants:

“I was asked to take my daughter initially in the Nepali ceremony to be a member of *Panchkanya*. But when we were there in the ceremony, my daughter was not included in the group and only four daughters from the dominant caste group were approved. I was very embarrassed at that time. I realized how caste discrimination exists in the Nepali diaspora even in the US.”

Another mother noted that “in diasporic gatherings, my kids were only allowed to worship after everyone else had.” Participants described a similar barring from entering places of worship or touching holy objects. “During festivals, they wished we had not come to their place,” a man said. Similarly, another male participant recounted how a visiting Nepali priest refused to shake his hand at a diasporic gathering, considering him polluted:

“A very popular Nepali priest had come to see the diaspora community leaders during a *Dharmic Mahotsav* [Hindu religious festival event] in the San Francisco Bay Area. In one of the meetings with the community leaders, he was shaking hands. When my turn approached in the queue, a friend introduced him to me by stating my full name. After the [priest] heard my name, he refused to shake my hand. I felt humiliated and an inferiority complex surrounded me. After that day, I decided not to join that *Dharmic Mahotsav* ever.”

Discrimination in Romantic Relationships

Caste-based discrimination also affected participants’ romantic relationships. One male participant who had married another Dalit recounted that “before marriage, I dated two dominant caste girls, whose families rejected me because of my caste.”

Participants had mainly married Dalits so there were very few experiences of inter-caste marriage to share. The only participant who was in an inter-caste relationship with a non-Dalit described facing caste-based discrimination from his wife's family, saying "I still cannot visit my in-laws' house because of my caste position."

Coming out as Dalit in the Diaspora

Individual interviews revealed that many Dalits chose to conceal their caste as a strategy to evade caste-based discrimination. Many who began the practice when they lived in Nepal maintained it after moving to the SF Bay Area. In contrast, some participants chose to disclose their caste identity despite the high likelihood of facing caste-based discrimination.

"People have changed their identity, severed ties with their families, and become contactless [to fit among the dominant castes]," one male participant said. Multiple participants described their fathers changing the family name they used in Nepal from a Dalit name to one that belonged to a dominant caste, in order to avoid caste-based discrimination and pursue better opportunities. A female participant described the practice thus: "we did not show our citizenship cards, and we called ourselves [another dominant caste name] in our rented apartment." In her recounting, she also shared that the experience of constantly concealing her identity led her to be constantly fearful of being discovered and lowered her self-esteem.

Multiple participants have chosen to openly disclose their Dalit identity while living in the SF Bay Area, despite the existence of caste-based discrimination among the Nepali diaspora. The same female participant who lived in fear in Nepal of being uncovered as Dalit embraced her identity after coming to the US with her Dalit husband. While she was finally able to take pride in her roots, the new Dalit family name reduced her privilege and opened pathways for caste-based discrimination in the form of microaggressions and social exclusion by dominant caste Nepalis:

"In Nepal, I used to hide my identity. I had a uniquely upper caste-sounding last name. My friends were curious and always wanted to get to the bottom of what my identity was. I could not fully express myself. Even on Facebook, I had a fake name. I felt caged by this false identity and always feared tribulations that would come with identity disclosure. Even after coming to the United States, I hid my identity. Only after my husband, a Dalit, gave me confidence did I accept my identity. Later, I also changed my Facebook name to my real Dalit name. While this helped me own my identity and take pride in it, this new identity disclosure also brought microaggressions and social exclusion. People would hear my name and instantly use non-respectful pronouns. I could hear the disrespect in their tone."

Another participant disapproved of identity concealment, even though he admitted that many Dalits felt they had no other safe options. He declared "I am proud of my caste," demonstrating how narratives around caste are shifting in the diaspora.

Mental health impacts of caste-based discrimination

Participants reported how the impacts of ongoing social exclusion and the daily struggles caused by caste-based discrimination accumulated over time, affecting Dalits’ mental health. One male participant shared that “caste-based discrimination has pained me immeasurably. In my childhood, I constantly wondered why I was born into a Dalit family.” He further expressed, “dominant caste Nepalis do not consider Dalits as humans. Their behavior pains me a lot. I am ashamed of identifying myself as Nepali.” Another male participant also spoke of the pain caused by caste-based discrimination, saying, “we have a lot of *pida* [pain] that emotionally breaks us [...] dominant castes, through actions and words, find ways to torture us psychologically.”

Participants focused on the pain and distress that caste-based discrimination caused them. One participant critiqued the Nepali diaspora for not having made progress, saying “in our [Dalit] hearts, there is a lot of *pir* [pain],” he said. Another participant recounted having trouble sleeping the night before meeting a dominant caste Nepali house owner from whom he hoped to rent a room, saying, “I had a restless night. I feared if she [a dominant caste woman] would ask my name and [what would happen] if I should tell her my real name.” Finally, some Dalit participants carried with them traumas that had roots in caste-based discrimination and violence which they had experienced in Nepal. One male participant said on this topic, “the [caste-based] trauma I experienced earlier [in Nepal] did not leave when I arrived in the U.S.”

No clear recourse for caste-based discrimination

Dalit participants did not know whom to approach if they were confronted with caste-based discriminatory incidents. Most of them said they would come to Nepali American Pariyar Association (NAPA), a Nepali Dalit organization in the SF Bay Area. Some favored informing the police if such incidents occurred. However, one male participant also pointed out that people feared registering complaints with the police. “If we do, we will be socially excluded, and we will lose a lot more than we will gain,” the participant remarked. Without caste as a protected category under the local policy, participants feared that complaints to local officials would fall on deaf ears.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate if Nepali Dalits experience caste-based discrimination in the San Francisco Bay Area and if so, to what extent, and with what impact on their mental health. A majority of participants said that they had experienced caste-based discrimination in the U.S. The types of caste-based discrimination described included social exclusion, workplace discrimination, challenges in pursuing inter-caste relationships, intergenerational prejudices, and discrimination in religious gatherings. Caste-based discrimination affected Dalits’ mental health, with participants describing these incidents as traumatizing and hurtful.

Policy Context

The question of caste discrimination among the South Asian diaspora in the US and the potential role for policy interventions has gained momentum in the past few years. While systematic national evidence for the scale of the problem is not readily available, one study conducted by community-based organization Equality Labs found that a significant proportion of surveyed Dalits reported experiencing caste discrimination in their place of work, educational institutions, and social interactions (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). Sixty percent of Dalits surveyed reported experiencing caste-based derogatory jokes or comments in the United States (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). While the study is based on a snowball sample and therefore proportions reported may not be easily generalizable across the U.S, the snowball sample used indicates that caste discrimination, as reported by participants, *is* present in the diaspora.

Several other significant developments also attest to the fact that the issue of caste discrimination in the South Asian diaspora deserves attention. In June 2020, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a landmark lawsuit against Cisco Systems for allegedly discriminating against an Indian employee based on caste (Dutt, 2020; Elzweig, 2021; Narayan, 2020). The lawsuit charged that Cisco, citing the lack of caste as a protected category under US law, refused to take corrective action even after the employee filed complaints with the Human Resources department (Dutt, 2020; Elzweig, 2021; Narayan, 2020). American institutions of higher education have also started to amend their anti-discrimination policies to include caste. In 2019, Brandeis University became the first US university to change its anti-discrimination policy and recognize caste as a protected category (Liebowitz, 2019; The Office of Human Resources at Brandeis University, 2019). The Department of Social Work at California State University (CSU) East Bay adopted caste as a protected category in 2020 (CSU East Bay Department of Social Work, 2020), and the Academic Senate of CSU East Bay passed a resolution urging the chancellor of the CSU system to recognize caste as a protected category in March 2021 (20-21 FDEC 3: Resolution in Support of Providing Protection to Dominated and Oppressed Castes at California State University, East Bay, 2021). The Associated Students at the University of California, Davis Senate also unanimously passed a resolution to recognize caste as a protected category in February 2021 (Duley, 2021; ASUCD Senate Resolution #8, 2021). The Cal State Student Association (CSSA) representing the nearly half a million students across all twenty-three campuses of the California State University (CSU) system (the country's most extensive four-year public university system) unanimously passed a resolution in support of adding caste as a protected category in April 2021 (Naik, 2021; Cal State Student Association, 2021). Finally, in January 2022, the entire CSU system added caste to its antidiscrimination policy (California State University, 2022).

The findings of this study and the social phenomenon described within it are not simply academic in nature and must be taken in the context of a sweeping expressed need in the diaspora to address the issue of caste. Unlike Mitra Pariyar's findings in which certain diasporic Nepali Dalits accepted caste-based discrimination as part of the social order (2018, 2019, 2020), participants in this study were vocal in their

opposition to caste-based discrimination and named its existence as a reason that they avoided engaging fully with the wider, multi-caste Nepali diaspora in the SF Bay Area. Many participants said that they felt ashamed to call themselves Nepali because they felt that the Nepali identity had been monopolized and appropriated by dominant caste members of the diaspora.

The individual interviews and focus group discussion helped determine that caste-based discrimination occurs in the San Francisco Bay area. As many participants recounted, caste-based discrimination was visible, and many dominant caste individuals still looked down on members of oppressed castes. Caste-based discrimination was present across multiple settings including workplaces, family interactions, and diasporic gatherings. While not all the participants concealed their caste identity, some used identity concealment as a strategy to deflect caste-based discrimination. This strategy had a downside as it affected their mental health and lowered their morale, self-esteem, and confidence. On the other hand, disclosing their caste identity in some instances cost Dalits housing, employment, and social opportunities.

Most Dalit participants did not know whom to reach out to if caste-based discrimination were to occur. This may be because much of the caste-based discrimination that Dalits face abroad is in the form of microaggressions, which are so normalized that Dalits let them pass. Additionally, as one participant stated, there are downsides to complaining about caste-based discrimination to the local police station. Nepali Dalits who come forward about discrimination they have faced by other Nepalis in the close-knit diaspora community may face social exclusion or a decrease in their social standing. Even if someone chose to issue a complaint to a police station in the Bay area, the police might not fully understand the gravity of caste-based discrimination because caste is still not recognized as a protected category in local anti-discrimination laws.

This study confirms and validates other ethnographic studies highlighting the overt and covert caste-based discrimination that Dalits in the Nepali diaspora go through every day (Pariyar, 2018, 2019, 2020). Additionally, it provides a unique contribution as the first study to examine this phenomenon among Nepalis living in the United States.

Study Strengths and Limitations

There are limitations to non-ethnographic research that relies on secondary data and fails to incorporate people's lived experiences. Additionally, given the historical power gap between dominant castes and oppressed castes, Dalit participants may police their words in front of dominant caste scholars, thereby limiting the findings and contributing to a narrow understanding of the impact of caste. Led by a Nepali Dalit scholar, this ethnographic study aimed to erase those potential pitfalls and contribute to filling the literature gap.

Thus, a main strength of the study was that it was embedded in the Nepali Dalit community in the SF Bay Area. The lead researcher/facilitator comes from a Nepali Dalit background, which made it easier to build rapport and establish trust among

participants. This may have been more difficult if the researcher were from a dominant caste. As one female participant put it, “in our heart, we had kept things secret, but now we can share these secrets on this platform.” One limitation was the low recruitment of women to the study, with many married women who were approached expressing that they believed their husbands’ experiences were the same as their own. This limitation might be addressed in future research on this topic by including female Dalit researchers in the study team, who might be able to recruit women separately and facilitate gender-matched interviews and focus groups to understand the unique experiences of Nepali Dalit women in the diaspora. The study only had Dalit participants who originated from Nepali hills, and not from the plains. Plains-based Dalits belong to one of the most marginalized communities in Nepal and future studies should incorporate their experiences.

Conclusion

This study confirms that caste-based discrimination exists within the SF Bay Area Nepali diaspora in the United States. Dalits reported experiencing caste-based discrimination in multiple settings, including in the workplace and when seeking housing. Caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay Area affects Nepali Dalits’ mental health, with many participants saying that they had sleepless nights thinking about caste in the US. Many participants did not know whom to approach after incidents of caste-based discrimination occurred. The absence of caste as a protected category under US and local laws made them hesitant to reach out to law enforcement and others who would enforce such a policy if it existed.

There needs to be more research on how caste-based discrimination affects Dalit-Americans in the US. Dalits continue to be one of the most marginalized and oppressed groups in the world. Future studies focusing on Nepali Dalit communities need to be conducted and should include the voices of more Dalit women and *Madhesi/Terai* Dalits from the southern Nepali plains. In addition to gathering more evidence on the unique experiences of Nepali Dalits in the diaspora through research, policymakers in areas with large South Asian diasporic populations such as the SF Bay Area need to move to include caste as a category protected under non-discrimination laws. Only with these initiatives can caste-based discrimination become a figment of the past.

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