

Recommendations for Increasing Dalit Political Participation in South Asia

The history of the countries in the region naturally shapes the road to democracy and political rights in South Asia. For example, India transitioned to democracy after gaining independence from its long colonization by Britain, while Nepal's democratic transition occurred following a history of oligarchies and patronage rule of royal elites and high-caste Hindus. Systemic inequality is embedded in the caste structure of both countries, making their social composition complex and rigid and leading to increased challenges in democratic reforms and changes. India, for instance—despite the affirmative policies and the legal mechanisms created to promote and empower Dalits and other marginalized groups, particularly in political processes through reservations—is still far behind in promoting the rule of law and inclusive democracy.

Any country's strategic choice in the electoral system is central to ensuring the numerical representation of minority candidates, the inclusiveness of the political parties, and the makeup of its Parliament. However, as demonstrated in India and Nepal, adopting systems that pursue this inclusion only at the surface level can fail or remain limited in realizing minority interests. For example, a 2005 study notes that the reservation system in India has only facilitated the participation of minority leaders, with no obligation to democratic accountability or even accountability to their community; a 1996 study called India a deviant case of “consociational democracy” that functions under a self-contradictory model of majoritarian democracy that reflects all elements of power sharing.^{22, 23}

Juxtaposing these survey findings with legal frameworks highlights glaring and perpetuated gaps in the political participation and representation of Dalit communities in South Asia. While India and Nepal have endorsed important policies to ensure the political representation of Dalits (and most marginalized communities), they have failed to translate those policies into the meaningful participation and well-being of the Dalit community. Other South Asian countries do not address Dalit political participation head-on. Therefore, more critical engagement is necessary to ensure Dalit issues and problems receive adequate representation. Through this analysis, we offer the following recommendations to all electoral stakeholders across South Asia to help countries increase Dalit inclusion in political life:

- **Conduct advocacy campaigns** in countries that lack legal provisions to (1) protect Dalit communities from violence and discrimination and (2) promote their full socio-economic and political participation to design effective legal frameworks for the recognition of rights, security, and political participation of Dalits.
- **Strengthen Dalit communities' knowledge and skills to advocate for their electoral and legal rights**, particularly in local languages, in countries with existing legal protections and provisions, such as Nepal and India.

²²Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2006. “The Impact of Affirmative Action in India: More Political than Socioeconomic.” *India Review* 5 (2): 173–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736480600824516>; Lijphart, Arend. 1969. “Consociational Democracy.” *World Politics* 21 (2): 207–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009820>

²³Reynolds, Andrew. 2010. “Electoral Democratisation in Nepal.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 40 (3): 509–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472331003798517>

- **Conduct targeted awareness programs on Dalit rights** to increase responsiveness among the greater community and the police to caste-based crimes and discrimination.
- **Build the skills and knowledge of elected Dalit representatives** and connect them with the international anti-racism and anti-discrimination activities of elected representatives in other countries.
- **Conduct further research on the major challenges Dalit leaders face** in seeking candidacy or election to understand barriers to Dalit political representation better.
- **Conduct additional research on the changing patterns of Dalits' socio-economic status** across South Asia to identify opportunities for encouraging their meaningful political participation.
- **Implement more robust census processes** to ensure Dalit populations are accurately counted. Show their numerical strength may enhance their political power.

We also offer recommendations for electoral management bodies:

- **Speak out against caste-based discrimination** using platforms available to electoral management bodies' chairpersons and commissioners as senior public officials. The leaders of electoral management bodies, especially when they enjoy the public's confidence, are well-positioned to explain the dangers of caste-based violence to the electoral process and democracy. By speaking out, leaders can help raise awareness of caste-based violence and hate speech and their consequences. Those actions, in turn, can help to mobilize a public response.
- **Collect and apply data on electoral violence and hate speech against Dalits** to mitigate those behaviors and safeguard all electoral stakeholders. Engage various security actors in joint security planning and implementation.
- **Conduct public information campaigns and voter education programs** to provide accurate information that promotes the rights of all people, especially marginalized groups such as Dalits. Such efforts can help voters to identify and address intolerance in their lives and to recognize and resist hate speech from officials, candidates and their supporters, and the media.