

Introduction

Electoral systems give people the power to determine who will occupy positions of authority. The central tenet of political participation is the idea of equality: that every citizen, regardless of caste, class, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, group, culture, or ethnic or religious background, should have an equal right and opportunity to engage with and contribute to the functioning of democratic institutions and processes. Citizens' participation and representation in governance through democratic institutions and processes—such as election management bodies and elections, constitutional bodies and constitution-building processes, political parties, and parliaments—are central to ensuring the long-term, systemic inclusion of non-elites and marginalized groups in democratic structures. Young and new democracies thus must answer two related questions:

- 1. How can electoral systems and processes be designed to promote the participation of marginalized groups?**
- 2. How can electoral stakeholders promote the greater representation of marginalized groups in elected bodies?**

These questions are crucial in caste-based societies (most notably India and Nepal) to design inclusive elections representing the marginalized caste group known as Dalits.

The caste system, although formally abolished in some South Asian countries, continues to categorize people at birth by occupation and social status, defining their place in society and dictating almost every aspect of their lives. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy are referred to as “untouchables” or members of “scheduled castes.” In many instances, members of those are forbidden from joining in the religious and social life of the community and are limited to performing menial tasks that are considered polluting or unclean. These stigmas remain evident to this day. The people of these outcast communities have adopted the term *Dalit* (oppressed). The word has come to symbolize for them a movement for change and the eradication of centuries-old oppression under the caste system.

Some legal efforts have improved Dalits' representation in educational institutions, governmental jobs, and elected positions. These include the affirmative action policies now embedded in the Indian and Nepali constitutions. Notwithstanding the positive impact of constitutionally granted affirmative action in India and Nepal, Dalits continue to represent one of the most underprivileged classes of society in those countries. Dalit populations in other countries across South Asia also face socio-political exclusion and marginalization due to the impact and influence of caste in elections, politics, and society generally.

This report provides insights from the first cross-national survey of Dalit community representatives, examining their responses to the above questions. It then reviews the legal frameworks of India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka concerning their commitments to Dalit rights, describing the gaps between those formal commitments and the lived experiences of the Dalit people in each country. Finally, the report offers recommendations to promote equity and break down the prevailing and pervasive barriers to the inclusive political representation and engagement of Dalits in South Asia.

Methodology

The core findings of this report are based on original data from the *Survey on the Political Representation of Dalit Persons in South Asia* and human rights activists and experts from countries across South Asia with Dalit populations. Survey respondents were recruited via email through the International Commission for Dalit Rights (ICDR) ListServ. As a convenience sample, the findings of this survey should not be taken as representative. However, they provide insights into the types of election-related issues that Dalit human rights activists and experts are considering.

In total, 114 participants originating from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka completed the survey; 213 additional partial responses were recorded.¹ The results analyzed in the report include complete responses only. The survey was made available in Bangla, English, Hindi, Nepali, Tamil, and Hindi to accommodate as broad an audience as possible. On average, respondents completed the survey in 21 minutes.

The survey findings are further informed by six in-depth interviews conducted with key informants from the Election Commission of Nepal, the Nepal National Dalit Commission, and other Nepali electoral stakeholders to develop an understanding of the challenges inherent to their political and electoral ecosystems that impact Dalit participation and representation. The interviewees were recruited and selected to participate in the study based on their expertise in elections in their country.

Finally, to contextualize the survey and interview data findings, the report incorporates primary source research on relevant international, national, and legal frameworks, including human rights agreements and constitutional amendments that guarantee the rights of the Dalits and other minority groups in electoral processes.

¹ The completion rate was 35 percent. Partial responses are not included in the summary of results presented in this paper, with the exception of quotations from responses to open-ended questions.