Conclusion

While South Asian countries have adopted many progressive policies regarding Dalit rights and representation, issues remain entrenched in deeper social and political structures. India has pioneered reservations for representation and provisions to ensure participation, which other South Asian nations—including Nepal—have gradually adopted. However, equality has not yet been achieved, and the pervasive violence inflicted upon Dalits continues despite the nations' commitment to various human rights treaties (see the Annex). These issues further compound obstacles to Dalits' access to their legally sanctioned political rights, such as electoral participation.

This complex phenomenon is characterized by notable representation on the outside, although insidious violence continues. Examined through an intersectional lens, it becomes abundantly clear that the complex electoral systems that follow the mixed system of first-past-the-post and proportional representation leave openings to manipulate and co-opt representatives from Dalit communities. Further, the system renders leaders from Dalits and other marginalized communities weak and powerless. The result is a system in South Asia in which Dalits appear as a political commodity that has been used as a "vote bank" to secure political power; nominal Dalits are represented, but their voices have not been heard or have been muted—even totally ignored.[24, 25]

This issue cannot be understood in isolation from inequalities entrenched in the social structures of the countries studied. The pluralities of identities, subjectivities, and representation are central to the power relationships maintained through electoral politics. The failure to identify points of disjunction limits the ability to establish policies that address social justice within the constricted political contexts.[26]

Approaching social and political representation as a counter-hegemonic action for establishing an equitable social, economic, and political structure for Dalits and other marginalized communities will require consideration of the larger historical context of elite privilege and structural and systemic embedding of oppression. How social relations overlap with political domination needs to be deciphered based on the locations of people and their interactions within the system. This will help situate the gaps in representation and oppression and aid in designing multi-layered actions to produce meaningful change in the lives of marginalized populations.

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