

DNF: Invisible power in Nepal

This casestudy looks at some ways that 'invisible power' operates in Nepal to perpetuate caste discrimination.

THE CONTEXT

Nepal is socially and culturally diverse, with a huge range of castes and ethnic groups. All individuals are born into a certain social caste that brings with it social status and expected roles. Mobility between castes is impossible. Members of what are seen as the lowest castes are not allowed to have any contact with members of the other, higher castes. *Dalits* (literally 'the oppressed') are traditionally placed at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy and are accorded the status of 'untouchable' in a dehumanising way. Although 'untouchability' and caste discrimination have been abolished by law, these practices continue to exist, being particularly strong in rural areas. The socialisation process is a primary factor in shaping these discriminatory attitudes in the minds of both low- and high-caste communities.

According to the 2001 census, *Dalits* make up more than 13% of the total Nepalese population of 23 million. They have gradually begun to abandon their traditional occupations such as tailoring and cobbling in the rural areas which has weakened their livelihood economy. This is being triggered by two factors: (i) unrestricted importation of ready-made clothes and slippers/shoes from outside Nepal and also production within the country, and (ii) inability of the *Dalits* to compete with well-finished better quality imported products due to lack of modernisation of their skills and a lack of financial resources for investment in improving quality. Politically, there is non-representation

of *Dalits* at all levels of policy-making and government.

The near decade-long conflict between Maoists and the state has been a major challenge to any campaign and advocacy work. On the one hand, there is a danger of organised movements advocating for *Dalit* rights being branded by the government as close to the Maoist movement, because of the emphasis on changing power relations through the process of empowerment. On the other hand, the Maoists may consider the advocacy initiative for *Dalit* rights to be superficial, without the radical restructuring of society.

ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

Officially established in 1998 with headquarters in Kathmandu, the *Dalit* NGO Federation (DNF) is an umbrella organisation of *Dalit* civil society organisations, which works to coordinate advocacy activities at the national level against all forms of caste discrimination and untouchability. In January 2004, DNF had more than 100 members, with another 125 organisations in the process of getting their membership.

DNF have found that forming a coordinated body for *Dalit* organisations is very challenging for a number of reasons:

- *Dalit* civil society organisations are divided along political party lines – hindering a strong united national *Dalit* movement
- the relatively low level of institutional capacity and the inexperience of *Dalit* civil society organisations makes all work challenging

- there is a sub-caste hierarchy among *Dalits* which causes social rifts
- society's attitude towards the continuation of caste discrimination and untouchability in traditional Hindu social structure is very entrenched
- there is weak gender integration in the *Dalit* campaign – a recent decision by the general assembly reserved 33% of membership of DNF's national and regional boards for women and its implementation may enhance the role of women for the advocacy of their rights

SOME WAYS INVISIBLE POWER OPERATES IN NEPAL

Members of the *Dalit* NGO Federation (DNF) identified a number of factors that trigger feelings of subordination and inferiority among *Dalits*.

In education DNF found that primary school textbooks perpetuate caste discrimination with messages such as 'the *damais*¹ sew the clothes'. Thus linking a particular caste with its traditional occupation which is seen as a low status activity. There have also been complaints that *Dalit* children are discriminated against in schools. They are sometimes asked by high-caste teachers to sit separately from other children. They are not allowed to touch water or cooked food that is to be consumed by the high castes, to eat with them or to drink from the same containers. Being treated in this way reinforces both *Dalit* children's sense of inferiority, and other children's sense of superiority.

Certain cultural beliefs degrade the social status of *Dalits*: for example, the belief that if a *Dalit* enters a high-caste house, the ancestral deity will be furious. The Hindu religion also forbids *Dalits* from entering religious sites.

Historically *Dalits* have been marginalised economically and hence tend to be the poorest class of society. Affluent people have a tendency to despise and insult them for this reason.

Dalit women suffer from social attitudes on gender, with the result that they are discriminated against not just because of their caste and class, but also because they are women. Male-female relations are as unequal and exploitative in *Dalit* society as they are in high-caste society.

Discrimination against *Dalits* also exists on the basis of age. For instance, high-caste children address an elderly low-caste person as *tha* (a form of 'you' that is normally used when talking to someone of lower status or age, broadly equivalent to 'tu' in French), whereas an elderly *Dalit* has to address a high-caste boy as *mukhiya sahaib* or *raja sahaib* (the chief of the community or the king).

Cultural behaviour as discussed above is learned by children from their families, communities and neighbourhoods, thereby perpetuating the attitudes that form the invisible power, and ensuring that discrimination against *Dalits* continues from one generation to the next.

There is also discrimination among *Dalits* themselves, caused by the sub-caste hierarchy that exists among them.

¹ A particular caste that traditionally sewed clothes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you see as the most strategic ways that DNF could work to challenge caste discrimination in Nepal? Take account of DNF's limited resources and capacity and the difficult context in which it works in your discussions.
2. What combination of strategies do you think DNF could adopt to work to build a united *Dalit* movement?
3. How does invisible power operate in the advocacy issue you are working on?
4. What strategies or combination of strategies do you find most useful? Why?