



Overcoming Caste Barriers through EMPHASIS

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Introduction

The caste system in South Asia dates back to over 3000 years, wherein people were grouped into primarily four “Varnas” or castes based on their occupation – Brahmin (scholars), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (traders) and Shudra (service providers). Over the years, this system of social stratification assumed a strictly hierarchical nature, by means of which the Brahmins were placed at the top of the social order, followed by the Kshatriyas (known as “Chhetri” in Nepal) and then the Vaishyas and Shudras, collectively referred to as the “lower” castes. Caste also became a hereditary identity that was ascribed to a person by birth, with education and financial status having very little influence on one’s social position and acceptance within the society. This led to many discriminatory practices such as people belonging to the higher castes not sharing space and eating food with the people belonging to the lower castes, forbidding inter-caste marriages and denying people belonging to the lower castes an equal access to common resources like community wells and places of worship. An extreme form of such discrimination was “untouchability” or the practice of ostracizing people who took up menial jobs, also called “Dalits”.

The caste system is quite rigid in the predominantly Hindu country of Nepal. Apart from the broad caste-based classification, one third of Nepal’s population comprises of the indigenous peoples or “Janjatis”, who are believed to be the native inhabitants of the country. Most of these ethnic groups except the relatively well-off Newars do not have a caste system in place. In spite of their rich cultural heritage, the Janjatis have remained largely marginalized and excluded from the mainstream. (IIDS study report, 2008)¹.

Several years of advocacy has resulted in caste-based discrimination being prohibited by law and declared a punishable offence in India as well as in Nepal. The governments of both countries have also undertaken equity measures such as providing reservations and financial aid to the people belonging to the lower castes and the indigenous peoples, to address historical injustices and ensure that they have equal opportunities to excel in terms of education and employment. However, the caste system is a very deep-rooted phenomenon and even today, eating together with people belonging to the lower castes or marrying a person outside one’s own caste is considered taboo.

In recent times, following the overthrow of the Nepali monarchy and move towards a federal republic, ethnicity and caste have taken center stage - the indigenous peoples (*adivasi /janajati*) who make up a third of the country having been guaranteed rights that have not yet been fulfilled. There is an observable reaction to this among certain Brahmin and Chhetri groups, seeking to prevent group-based rights from becoming an important factor in the country that earlier had a political system associated with group-based discrimination. Certain outside analysts have suggested that "seeking a balance in approach requires addressing both specific indigenous historical injustices while creating a common citizenship for all marginalized citizens regardless of identity, which remains a particularly challenging issue for Nepal." (Hachhethu, 2003)².

¹ Caste-based Discrimination in South Asia – A Study on Nepal, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2008

² “The Question of Inclusion and Exclusion in Nepal – Interface between State and Ethnicity.” Paper presented to the Conference on “The Agenda of Transformation: Inclusion in Nepali Democracy” organized by Social Science Baha by Krishna Hachhethu, 2003.



The EMPHASIS Project

EMPHASIS (Enhancing Mobile Population's Access to HIV/AIDS Services Information and Support) is a 5-year, multi-country project funded by the Big Lottery Fund, U.K. The project, ending in 2014, is designed to address cross border mobility-related vulnerabilities, using an HIV lens and a specific gender focus. The project is implemented through respective CARE Country Offices working with implementing partners (local nongovernment organisations) in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. In India the project works with both Nepalese Migrants and Bengali speaking Migrants. The Nepalese migrants are reached with information and services at the Indo-Nepal border, Delhi (NCR) and Mumbai (and adjoining areas).

The key strategies adopted by the project include inter-personal communication through outreach, facilitating safe meeting, information and relaxation places in Drop-in-Centers (DIC), sensitising stakeholders and service providers in providing quality and migrant friendly services, as well as linking migrants to these services.

Caste Context in EMPHASIS

During the initial interactions that the EMPHASIS team had with the Nepalese community in Delhi, the issue of caste emerged as one of the concerns, as the members of the community identified themselves very strongly with their castes. EMPHASIS team working in the field noticed that people though were not discriminating openly, there were certain barriers related to castes. People of higher caste were not comfortable sitting together in the DIC or in meetings and eating refreshments with people of a lower caste. This is well reflected in one of the quotes by higher caste people on the extent they follow caste in Nepal.

"Lower caste people are generally not allowed to even enter an upper caste person's home, forget cooking for them. Whenever I recruited domestic helps, I made sure that they belonged to the same caste as my family." Min Bahadur Karki, 50 (Chhetri).

The project implementation on ground attempted to congregate people of all castes together. However in some contexts lower caste people did not join the project activities and distanced themselves from gatherings that involved higher caste people. Given this scenario EMPHASIS staff tried to advocate with key stakeholders on this front in order to ensure information and services are received by the impact population indiscriminately. The priest of the local temple in one intervention site also seemed to fuel these prejudices and discriminatory behavior.

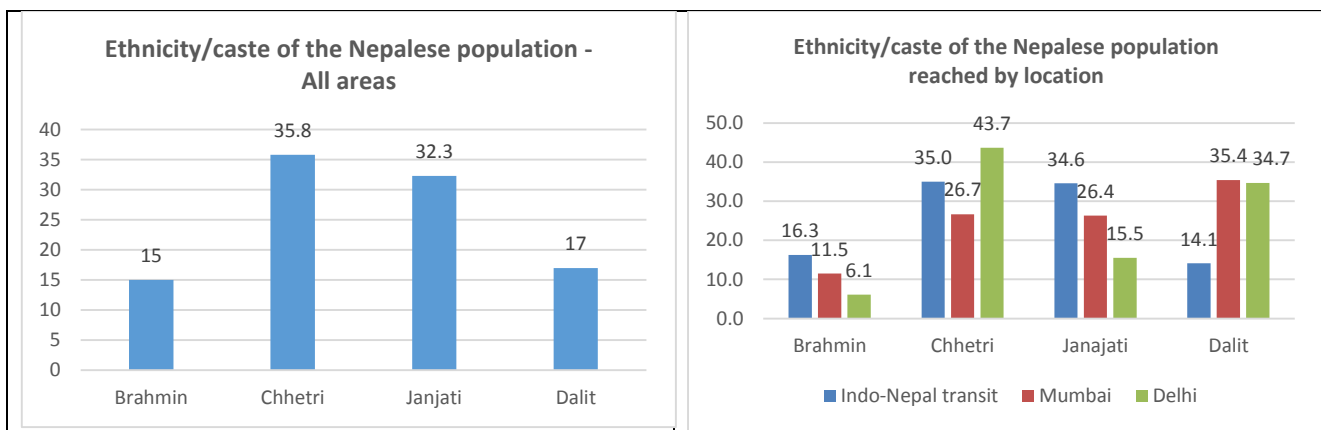
In contrast to the scenario in Delhi, caste based discrimination was reported as a non-issue among the Nepali migrant community in Mumbai. People had not shown reservations in sitting together and having refreshments with others in the DIC, and participated in group activities irrespective of their caste. In fact many Nepalese migrants even opposed to the idea of being asked about their caste, as they felt that being away from Nepal, caste-based identities were quite irrelevant. One of the EMPHASIS staff in Mumbai shares the experience of working with Nepalese community in Mumbai as below.

“While working with Nepali community in Mumbai we did not find any issues of caste. All caste migrants gathers in our all activities & share their experience with each other & take snacks. They are also living together & cooking jointly. They help each other. Mixed caste groups of Nepali migrants are working in Mumbai. They are living together in Hotel, Company, Pump House & rented room. So we never found any issue of caste related discrimination.” –Purna Kumal, Project Coordinator, Mumbai

During our meetings at DIC and in the field activities all upper caste and lower caste people come. They eat and sit together. I have never come across any situation when anybody discriminated others on the basis of their caste.” – Prakash Pariyar, Outreach Worker, Mumbai

Ethnicity / Caste wise Coverage in EMPHASIS

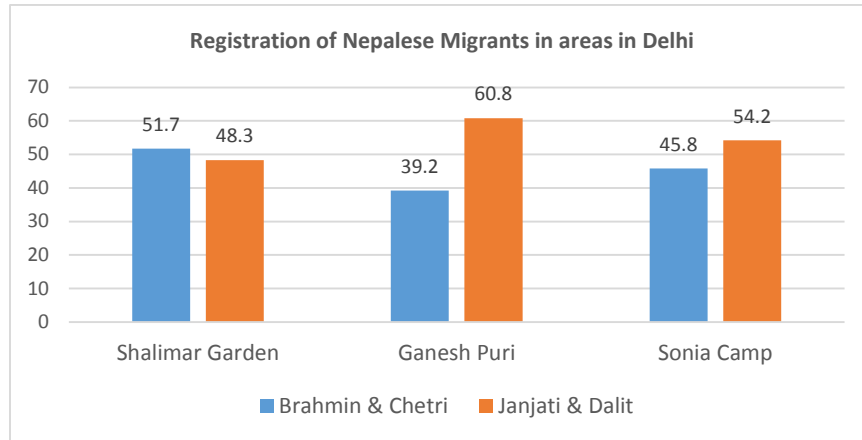
The EMPHASIS project started work on the field in 2010 and started collecting profiles of people through a First Contact Form (FCF), which also serves as registration. The total number of people registered through FCF is 99,867 individuals. An analysis of the data obtained from the first contact form records, shows that almost half (49.3%) of the total impact population registered comprises of people belonging to Janjati and Dalit castes².



Data source: First contact form record

Location-wise analysis also reflects similar trends, with 48.7%, 61.8% and 50.2% of the total impact population reached out to in each of the intervention areas of Indo-Nepal transit, Mumbai and Delhi respectively, belonging to the Janjati and Dalit castes.

DICs are the locations where the EMPHASIS project could find indications about caste based differences playing out, especially in attendance. Thus three areas where DICs are situated are focused on in this document. It shows that 48.3%, 60.8% and 54.2% of the impact population in the areas of Shalimar Garden, Ganesh Puri and Sonia Camp comprises of people from the lower castes (Janjatis and dalits).



Data source: First contact form record

EMPHASIS Initiatives to address the issue³

The EMPHASIS project team undertook certain initiatives to address the problem of caste-based discrimination.

- Initially community meetings were called to discuss the issue of casteism and garner the support of the local community leaders to effectively address the same. This is now a regular feature wherein a committee with equal representation from all sections of the local Nepali community has been formed to meet twice or thrice a month.
- Secondly, during all the activities conducted in the DIC, the arrangements for seating and distribution of refreshments were such, that everybody was seated and catered to on an equal footing. Almost 2 to 3 meetings were organized in the DIC every month wherein the issue of caste is discussed at length. A committee with equal representation from all the sections of the local Nepalese community was formed to preside over these meetings.
- Thirdly, it was ensured that every member of the community, irrespective of his/her caste was invited to participate in all project activities such as street plays, magic shows, infotainment programs and video shows as well as celebrate festivals like Holi, Dusshera, Teej and Diwali together.



Members from the community sitting together and watching video show organized by EMPHASIS

These steps have contributed in fostering a sense of unity among the Nepali migrant community in Delhi. Gradually the situation started improving. Even though the caste barriers were not been completely broken down, discriminatory behaviour is not found in the project context. People began hearing out each other’s views without any prejudice, which is reflected in seating and eating together.

“Now-a-days we are also invited to attend many mass events and cultural gatherings which were earlier attended mostly by the upper caste people.” – Kundan Sunar, 32, Shalimar Garden (Dalit).

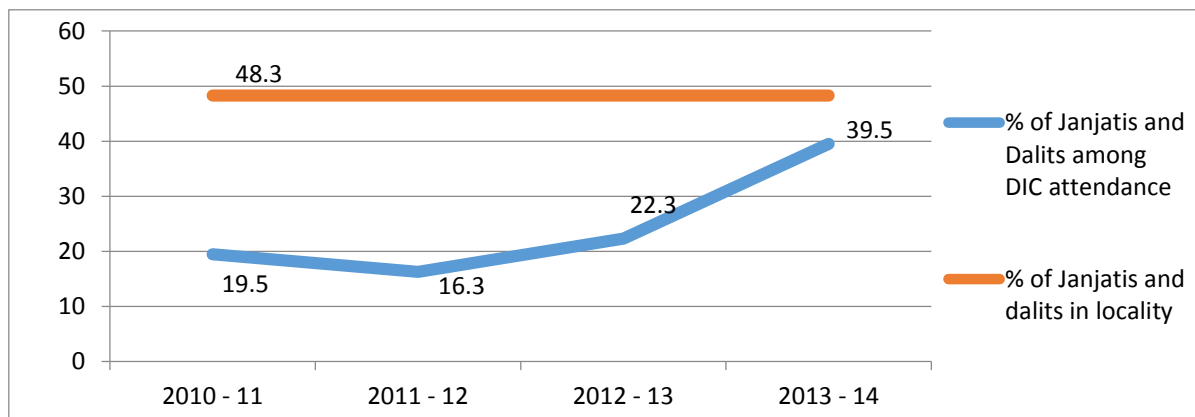
“Earlier I used to hesitate to sit with the lower caste people and was reluctant to share food with them at social gatherings. But now I realize that being a good human being is more important than belonging to an upper caste and discriminating against people in the name of tradition. The EMPHASIS project has really done a fabulous job of changing people’s mindset.” - Kamal, 35, Shalimar Garden (Brahmin).

Analysis of DIC attendance

Analysis of the DIC coverage data from 2010 to 2014 obtained from the EMPHASIS DICs in Delhi, shows a steady increase in the percentage of Janjatis and Dalits who have visited the DICs over the years. According to the First Contact Form records, 48.3%, 60.8% and 54.2% of the impact population in the areas of Shalimar Garden, Ganesh Puri and Sonia Camp respectively belongs to the lower castes. In the fourth year of the project’s implementation, 39.5%, 62% and 68% of the people who accessed the services of the DICs in Shalimar Garden, Ganesh Puri and Sonia Camp respectively belonged to the lower castes. Another significant observation is the fact that more than half of the total number of people who have been reached out to through the DICs in Sonia Camp and Ganesh Puri belong to the backward castes. The charts below shows the trend in coverage of janjati and dalits in three DICs over the years.

Shalimar Garden

At Shalimar Garden, the proportion of Janjatis and Dalits were very low and had dipped even further in one year. It was observed that very few of the Janjatis and Dalits were attending the DIC. As the outreach staff focused on those who were not being reached and encouraged them to attend, things gradually changed.



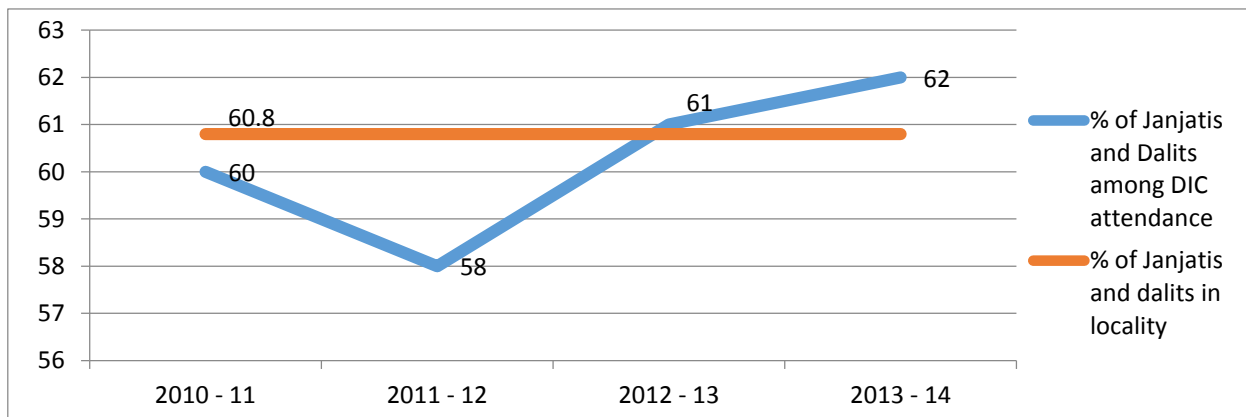
Suresh Giri is a 40-year old man who hails from Nepal and stays in Shalimar Garden, Delhi. Back in 2010, when the EMPHASIS team, along with a few Nepalese migrants from his locality tried to orient him about the project, he refused to listen to them and left hastily. The next day, he met an EMPHASIS field worker alone and explained to him that he did not talk to them the previous day because the group also comprised of people from a lower caste. He further stated that back home in Nepal, the norm for people from his caste was to not even have water offered by people belonging to a backward caste. Secondly, it is considered an insult if women of the house ate before the men. In the DIC, women are eating before the men as well. The project team tried to sensitize him on the issue of casteism, as well as on gender, but to no avail. Suresh argued that these were customs prevalent in the society for hundreds of years and nobody could change them.

However, the project team continued to meet him regularly and a few days later, he invited them for his son’s engagement. The team turned down the invitation saying that they would like to attend the ceremony only if all the members of the group, irrespective of their caste were invited. Suresh went silent and seemed very embarrassed. He remained absent in many of the subsequent project activities and meetings organized in the area. After some time, he came again and did attend one of the EMPHASIS meetings, but left when all the participants started having refreshments. After a few months he again came to the DIC and sat all by himself. He took the tea offered to him and confessed that he felt alienated and was ashamed of his behavior. He said that because of his behavior, he was not able to interact with fellow Nepalese and staying so far from home, if people are not able to live together, than it is his loss.

He made it a point to attend the next EMPHASIS meeting and stay on till it was over, in order to interact with everybody. All the other members of the Nepalese migrant community were surprised to find him there and gladly welcomed him in their midst. Today, Suresh participates enthusiastically in all project activities and mingles with all his fellow Nepalese, without discriminating against anybody due to their caste or gender.

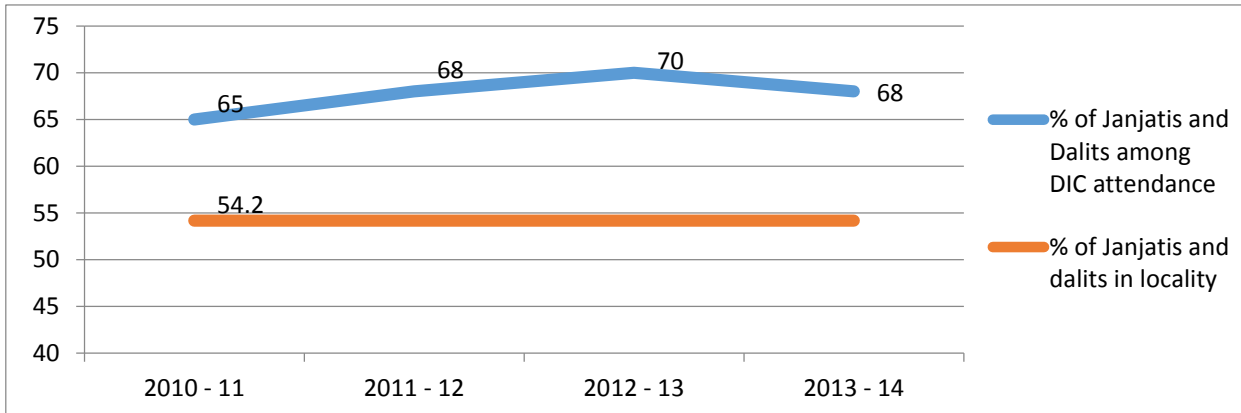
Ganesh Puri:

At Ganesh Puri, a large number of Janjatis and Dalits attended the DIC from the very beginning. There was a small dip in the second year as some Janjatis and Dalits were not comfortable. As they became part of the leadership in the DIC, the proportion of Jantatis and Dalits have increased and currently is slightly higher than their proportion in the local community. In this DIC, an ideal proportion of migrants visit the DIC that mirrors the proportion in the local community.



Sonia Camp:

At Sonia Camp, the number of Janjatis and Dalits in DICs have remained constant at a very high proportion in relation to the proportion they have in the local community. In this DIC, a large number of Janjatis and Dalits have been very active and this ownership reflects in their attendance in the DIC. The proportion of Janjatis and Dalits however has stayed within a tight band between 10 to 15 percentage points above their proportion in the local community. This indicates that there is consistency among the other castes (Brahmins and Chhetris) in terms of attendance at the DIC.



Impacting at the societal level

One of the key factors in minimizing caste difference has been the unity among the Nepalese people in general that EMPHASIS has been able to facilitate. This is reflected in the manner in which the Nepalese migrants in the area, spend their time together in the DIC, and help each other in times of difficulty, irrespective of their caste.

Sumit Pariyar is a 45 year old man, who hails from Nepal and stays with his family in Rajiv Gandhi Camp, a colony which houses many Nepalese migrants, in Naraina, Delhi. When the EMPHASIS team started working in this locality and met Sumit to orient him on the issues of HIV&AIDS and safe mobility, he shared with them the problems that he and his family members have to put up with, on account of their belonging to a Dalit caste. He recounted an incident wherein the priest of the local temple had refused to apply “tilak” to his son and daughter after performing a religious rite, because they belonged to a lower caste.

The project team then approached the priest and urged him to call a meeting of the “Mandir Samiti”, wherein the issue of casteism was discussed. The meeting was inconclusive and changes were not visible. The EMPHASIS team remained undeterred and strictly discouraged any kind of caste-based discrimination. Gradually, as the community came together more often, they began to realize the importance of being united to address their collective problems effectively. Gradually the discrimination eased.

Today, Sumit and his family do not face any discrimination due to their caste. The temple priest and the other NMPs give the family due respect and involve them in all community-based activities. Sumit credits the EMPHASIS team for having brought about this change in the mindset of the community at large and putting an end to caste-based discrimination.

25-year old Ram and 22-year old Urmila (names changed) are Nepalese migrants, who have lived in Kapashera, Delhi for the past eight years. Growing up together in the same neighborhood, they fell in love with each other and decided to get married. However, Ram's family did not approve of their match, as Urmila's family belonged to a caste lower than theirs in the social hierarchy, forcing the couple to have a court marriage. Ram's family was furious and disowned them. Ram and Urmila were thrown out of the family's home and were frequently harassed by their relatives.

An EMPHASIS outreach worker met Ram and during the course of orienting him about the project, he came to know about Ram's dispute with his family. The project team approached Ram's parents and while orienting them about the EMPHASIS project, discussed the issue of casteism. Ram's family was invited to participate in all the discussions held as a part of EMPHASIS and was simultaneously sensitized on discouraging caste-based discrimination. Later the EMPHASIS team held a meeting between Ram's family and a few elders from the community, who counseled the family. Finally Ram's parents realized their mistake and welcomed back their son and daughter-in-law into their family. Ram and Urmila are extremely grateful to the EMPHASIS team for having resolved the issue and re-uniting them with their family.

Over a period of time this brought about a change not only with respect to the EMPHASIS project activities, but also in the social relations, increasingly voiced by women in the community.

"I feel good to have some upper caste people in my home, sharing tea and snacks with our family, which never happened earlier. The EMPHASIS project has brought about unity among all Nepalese migrants irrespective of any caste." - Shanti Sunar, 22, Ganesh Puri (Dalit).

"Now I can talk and be friends with our neighbors who belong to an upper caste. I go to the market along with them and we also do share food dishes with each other almost on regular basis. It couldn't have possible if EMPHASIS wasn't there. The team came to us with such valuable information and the knowledge we gained helped to the break caste barriers in our community." - Nanda Devi, 45, Shalimar Garden (Dalit).

EMPHASIS has encouraged recruitment of staff from the community it is working with to inculcate a sense of belongingness to the program.

An analysis of distribution of caste categories of the Nepalese staff who are working with EMPHASIS implementing partners show that 34% of the staff members belong to Janjati or Dalit castes.

Conclusion

The experience of the EMPHASIS project shows that it is important for project staff at all levels to sensitive to the fact that those who are socially more excluded may not be getting served in an equal manner. As the project has shown, it is possible to ensure that project services can ensure that the more disadvantaged can access information and services if a concerted effort is made, especially by intervening at the societal level.

¹ Kaur, N., Bohidar, N. and Deepthi, G.S. 2014. Overcoming Caste Barriers through EMPHASIS. EMPHASIS Project Document, CARE.

² The migrants mentioned their "jati" names during the registration. Umesh Gahatraj and Prakash Pandey from the CARE team in Nepal; and team of Bhupendra Verma, Project Coordinator of BGSVS working at Indo-Nepal transit points supported in clubbing these caste names into the broad categories mentioned in the document.

³ Inputs were received from Mamta Behera (Partnership Coordinator, CARE), Kshemendra Kumar Mishra (Project Coordinator, ACT) and Kuldeep Nath (Project Coordinator, MCF) in Delhi; and Sandeep Gaikwad (Partnership Coordinator, CARE) and Purna Kumal (Project Coordinator, ARC) in Mumbai for this document.