

Understanding Inequality in Nepal: Theoretical and Empirical Explorations

Tika Ram Gautam, PhD

Associate Professor, Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University

Inequality is one of the core issues in debates going on in Nepal since last 2-3 decades. The issue is however mostly discussed; as we see, in the line of ethnicity alone. The key question is therefore theoretical identification of the key dimensions of inequality and an empirical exploration of inter- and intra-group inequalities across ethnic groups in Nepal. Based on large scale survey data; NLSS III, this study attempts to identify key dimensions and explore inter and intra-group inequalities using some statistical tests.

Capability, employment and ownership are important dimensions of inequality prevailing in all societies of the world and Nepal is no exception to this. Inequality, therefore, is the unequal distribution of access to resources and opportunities such as capability, employment and ownership. Primarily, access to opportunities, which enhances capability, has been unequally distributed across all ethnic groups of Nepal indicating strong intra-group differences with high coefficient of variation. All ethnic groups include individuals engaged in almost all sectors of employment. None of the ethnic groups has domination over all sectors of employment which indicates that distribution of access to resources also does not follow a particular ethnic line. Even Dalit and Tarai Janajati are represented in various employment sectors. For instance, the ratio of proportion of population engaged in officer level job to the proportion of eligible candidates is lowest among Brahman i.e. 1:3, which reveals a different picture as opposed to what is believed in contemporary Nepal. At the same time, this ratio among Newar, Madhesi and Chhetri is 1:2 and among H/M Janajati and Dalit, it is 3:4 which is higher compared to that of Brahman. It shows that the individuals have unequal access to employment, which provides them different social status. This is a phenomenon which Max Weber had pointed out long back. Ownership is another important dimension of inequality, which includes here ownership of agricultural land, livestock, agricultural equipment, non-agricultural enterprise and house. Distribution of access to such productive resources and assets is also unequally made across ethnic groups in Nepal, because it varies from one variable to another and one ethnic group to another. Such unequal phenomenon across all ethnic groups has created significant differences between them and strong intra-ethnic inequality with high coefficient of variation. This has resulted into a division of Nepali people/households into two classes of haves and have not, a process which has received significant space in Karl Marx.