

# DEVELOPING A STRATEGY TO EMPOWER DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

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**DAAYITWA  
NEPAL PUBLIC SERVICE FELLOWSHIP  
WINTER 2015**

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*Though Naya Muluki Ain (New Civil Code) of 1962 and the new constitution of 1990 have sought to end caste discrimination and development organizations have supported this, it has continued. The empowerment of Dalit is a major challenge due to social structure that exists in the society of Nepal. It is hard to empower Dalit unless there is an inclusive way.*

*This paper follows a step taken to put forward the voice of Dalit community of Gunjanagar, Chitwan. Instead of giving them solution directly and carrying out a specific program, to develop confidence and decision making power Focus Group Discussion (FDG) was conducted where they were able to put forward their voices. Empowering Dalits makes them stronger and can go in healthy competition along with society's so called "upper caste." Helping them put forward their ideas and views of how can they be empowered strengthen their capacity and decision making power.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Daayitwa Abhiyan for providing me this wonderful life time opportunity working with Member of Parliament Honorable Shiva Kumari Gotame. Being a fellow of Daayitwa has sharpened my professional and personal ability. It is a huge opportunity Daayitwa has offered me to create an impact at the national level.*

*I would specifically like to express my immense thank to Ms. Subecha Dahal, Mr. Busan P. K. D Prasain and Mr. Chhitij Bashyal for their support and guidance throughout the fellowship. Further I would like to extend my gratitude to Honorable Shiva Kumari Gotame for her guidance and flexibility on working on the topic “Developing Strategy to Empower Disadvantaged Group”.*

*Furthermore, I would like to thank all the interviewees for sharing their experiences and thought. Especially, I would like to show appreciation to Mr. Gunja Man B.K of Gunjanagar Chitwan, without whom gathering people of Gunjanagar would have been challenging task. In addition, I am thankful to all the brilliant Daayitwa Winter Fellows 2015 who have constantly helped and supported with their vast knowledge and experiences.*

*Finally I would like to thank each and every members of Daayitwa for their encouragement and support throughout the fellowship.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is based on the research conducted in Gunjanagar, Chitwan. On recommendation of Honorable MP Shiva Kumari Gotame, this place was optioned to conduct research on “Developing Strategy To Empower Disadvantaged Group”. Gunjanagar is a recently announced Municipality, now it is named Chitaban Nagarpalika. This area was chosen as sample area for the study as around 2000 Dalits reside in this area and their economic background is lower than those (upper caste) living in same area.

During ancient time in Gunjanagar, the Dalits and upper caste of the society were separated by the area. However in present days they all live together and in mutual understanding but the structure can still be seen.

The research methodology was Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII). Seven FGD were conducted in six different areas of Gunjanagar and four KII were conducted with Gunjanagar’s residents to know present situation of Dalits and actions that has been carried out for their economic growth.

These FGD and KII were able to gather information on discrimination Dalits are facing in present day context. During discussion the group came up with the solution that various skill based trainings can be conducted to empower Dalit community and this will make them independent and empowerment will take place automatically.

To decrease the discrimination Dalits are facing, several actions can be taken for instance awareness programs, skill development trainings and introducing Nation’s Policy in education system of Nepal. Further, for the effective empowerment through various trainings the proper study should be conducted regarding the present day market. This will empower the Dalit community in long term increasing the effectiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

During five months of fellowship program working on “Developing Strategy to Empower Disadvantage Group” the research was conducted in Gunjanagar, Chitwan. The research aimed to study how Dalits can be empowered. For this purpose Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used as tool to gather ideas of the targeted group for a better solution on how to empower disadvantage group. It served as a good platform to gather people from similar backgrounds to discuss a specific topic of interest. In short span of time large number of population was covered with FGD.

The problem of the Dalits (discrimination faced by Dalits) is a national problem and not the problem of any specific community. Such problem could be resolved in an integrated manner by focusing on their education, health, income, political participation and other core issues. Massive awareness and advocacy programs should be launched to sensitize their problems. Pressure groups need to be formed to see that affirmative action is taken and the anti- discriminatory laws are effectively enforced. The leadership development training should be provided to the different groups of the Dalits, particularly to the girls and women.

From the FGD various issues came into lime light. For instance present situation of Dalits of Gunjanagar, the discrimination they are facing on present day however the discrimination level has decreased vastly. There was absence of awareness level in context to government policies on Disadvantage group.

I was seeking their help to help them, as developing a strategy without their participation would have been like helping them without their consciousness. For active participation in the future programs it is important to have active participation of the targeted group in decision making. This will give them the feeling of ownership and when targeted group is involved in decision making it will increase their confidence which will lessen the chances of backing up during implementation phase. For the success of any strategy building or projects, when targeted groups are included in decision making there is higher chances of success. On the other hand, it builds the leadership quality on the targeted group.

In the beginning it was hard to figure out what, where and how the research to be conducted, there were various ideas. Gunjanagar was chosen as the sample area. It is known fact that Terai has strong infrastructural facilities and specially Chitwan. Gunjanagar was not an exceptional case; it has all the infrastructural facilities. The total population of this area is 15071 where male population is 6829 and female population is 8242. Total number of household is 3546. Among 15071 people almost 2000 belong to disadvantaged groups, they have poor economic background and less opportunity in comparison to those who are of upper caste.

## HISTORY OF CASTE SYSTEM IN NEPAL

Caste is one of the most important parts of Hindu Social System. Dalits or the untouchable's community as a whole has the lowest status in the Hindu Social Hierarchical structure. Dalits are discriminative against by the upper caste because of the deeply rooted beliefs fostered ironically over time by the religion and by so called upper caste. However, the caste system was formally abolished following the introduction of the new legal code (Naya Muluki Ain) in 1963. Dalits across the country are still stigmatized as untouchables. People belonging to higher caste in many parts of the country still do not accept water and cooked food from them.

The origin of caste system thought to have developed in South Asia towards the end of the Bedic period. This was essentially a division of labour into four board groups known as the Varna. It was hierarchical in nature with Brahmins at the top, engaged in philosophical and religious pursuits, Chettri involved in military and political field, Vaishya, the businessmen and farmers and Shudras, the lowest Varna engaged in manual labour and traditional crafts.

The caste system appears to have been first conceived in Nepal towards the beginning of Lichhivi period. In the Kathmandu Valley Jayasthiti Malla established the caste system on the basis of Manusmriti. Accordingly it was required to adopt professions, wear cloths and ornaments and construct houses in accordance with the social status of different castes. Violating these rules was liable to certain punishment. Despite the fact that castes were based on various professions, there evolved untouchability later.

Caste categories diverged for the four Varnas of the classical Vedic model and instead had three categories to accommodate the tribal peoples between the pure and impure castes. These were further classified into five hierarchies with the following order precedence.

1. Thagadhari (wearer of holy chord)
2. Matwali
  - i. Namasyane Matwali (Non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers)
  - ii. Masyane Matwali (Enslavable alcohol drinkers)
3. Pani nachalne choichito halnu napanne, (impure but touchable castes)
4. Pani nachalne choichito halnu parne, (impure and untouchable castes) (1)

## DISADVANTAGED GROUP

Disadvantage Group is that group of people who are in disadvantaged position in society who basically lack economic, political and social opportunities. In European context, the disadvantaged group mainly refers to the people who lose the ability to work and live on the social welfare and government help. Losing or having no ability of working and lacking the necessary living income are the common characters of them.”

In the Chinese context disadvantaged groups are “those social colonies who need the help and support from nation and society because they cannot maintain the basic living standard for themselves and their family members with their own strength or ability.” In China, disadvantaged group has been divided into three types: social, physiology and natural.

- i) Socially disadvantaged group includes, unemployed, peasant-workers, university students from poor families, poor single- parent families, poor families with members serving prison terms and teenagers and minors who have committed crimes and are prone to committing crimes.
- ii) Physiologically disadvantaged group are people with disabilities, old aged, women and children.
- iii) Naturally disadvantaged group include those who live in poverty mainly due to out-of-the-way geographical locations, harsh environment, dearth of natural resources or natural disasters.

The context of China and Nepal is somehow similar, but in Nepal due to hierarchy in caste division one of the disadvantaged group is those who are called ‘untouchables’ in the society, the people of lower caste (Dalits). Dalits are the most backward and less fortunate citizens of Nepal. They have no or less right in many contexts in Nepal. Dalits are considered ‘untouchables’ as water and food touched or prepared by Dalit is regarded impure by societies so called ‘touchables’.

After Democracy in April 1990, as rights of citizens, diverse groups got space to express their opinions openly and to assert their identities. However, the dominant order has remained largely confined to Bhramins and Chhetries (society’s upper caste). The democratic transition is unsuccessful to be inclusive in political and policy making reform. Those left out are mainly ‘untouchable’ caste (Dalits), women, tribal, indigenous ethnic groups, the Adivasi Janajatis or ‘indigenous group’. This order has been slowly changing, however, discrimination can still be seen in many different forms for instance the issue of letting Dalits into the societies so called upper caste houses or having the meal prepared by Dalits.

## **Overview on the Practice of Untouchability in Nepal**

The Dalit community has not only been discriminated in the Hindu caste hierarchy but they have also been suppressed by the state. In the Nepalese history, an account of the exploitation of the Dalit communities by the State dates back to the mediaeval period in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when King Jayasthiti Malla formalized the caste system, they forfeited their right to education and they were denied of the right to acquire property. They were discouraged from constructing good house and touch persons of higher castes, certain Dalits were almost forced to live either in the outskirts of the villages or in the filthy slums.

During reign of Jung Bahadur Rana further formalized the caste system by introducing the Muluki Ain (Civil Code) in 1853. In the MA the Brahmins, holding highest position in Hindu caste hierarchy, were excluded from capital punishment, while the other castes of people, including the Dalits were subject to such punishment. It was only in the MA of 1963 that discrimination between the Brahmins and other castes in the matter of capital punishment was abolished. It stated that legally every citizen is equal irrespective of caste, creed and sex but it did not declare the act of untouchability to be punishable.

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1990 declared discrimination on the basis of caste as punishable. Subsequently, a Committee for the upliftment of the Dalits Upekshit Utpedit Dalitbarg bikas Samiti under the chairmanship of the Minister of Local Development was established. In addition, the Dalit Committee was formed at the national level in 2002 for the improvement of condition of Dalits.

Unequal distribution of resources and exploitative relations of production have compelled most of the Dalits to live as paupers, landless and homeless. Most of the people from these castes are ultra poor and below the poverty line.

## **Present Situation of Dalits in Nepal**

Nepalese society is clearly splits into touchables and untouchables. The practice of untouchability penetrated down to the untouchables. As a result, it went to the extent of making discrimination between touchable and untouchable castes within the untouchable community itself. For instance, Kami and Sarki communities regard other communities like Damai as untouchable, while there does exist inequality even between Kamis and Sarkis. Damai treat

communities like Gains untouchable. Though public places were opened to low caste people in some palces, the situation remained unchanged to a large extent. There has been made a legal sanction in the civil code against untouchability; however, it has turned out to be meaningless since its violation is not liable to any specific penalty. According to Act 11(4) of the new constitution of Nepal (1990), however, untouchability has been made punishable. The civil code has also been amended accordingly. Despite these constitutional and legal provisions, untouchability has been still found in practice. So-called higher caste people do not allow low-caste people to have an access to temples and other public places. Discrimination with respect to caste, color and class was strangling human race and turned out to be a slur on humanity.



Picture 1: Resident area of Gunjanagar.

In Gunjanagar in ancient time the Dalits and upper caste of the society were separated by the area. However in present days they all live together and in mutual understanding but the structure can still be seen. In the above picture it can be seen, the resident area of Dalits and Upper Caste people have been separated by a road in between. In the left area (of the picture) upper caste people resides where as in the right (of the picture) Dalits resides. Though this structure can still be seen they have good relation as neighbors.

## APPROACH

It was crucial task to gather statistical data on how can be Dalits empowered. Various approaches could have been commenced but the question was would it have been effective or would it have long term influence on lives of targeted group.

For a better solution on how to empower disadvantage group, the best answer I found was, “seeking the targeted group’s help to help themselves”. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was chosen to gather ideas of targeted group as it is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds to discuss a specific topic of interest. In short span of time large number of population was covered with FGD, it worked as a platform where people were able to discuss and generate ideas among themselves. The FGD was conducted with 7 different groups of Disadvantaged Group. A video recorder was used to record the discussion with the purpose of making a video documentation.

Key Informant Interview was another tool for gathering the information. It helped to obtain depth knowledge on knowing the situation of the society. Four, Key Informant Interview (KII) was also conducted with Gunjanagar’s resident to know present situation of Dalits and actions that has been carried out for their economic growth.

Questions for KII are in Annex. The questions were open ended, it lead from one point to another. Determining the information required the questions were outlined, the open ended questions helped to elaborate the questions. The outcome of this was vast; it raised unexpected answers as well. Overall the FGD and KII was informative.

FGD was conducted with seven different groups in six wards of Gunjanagar Municipality. The participants of FGD were 90 per cent women (aged fourteen to fifty) and 10 per cent men (aged twenty to 50). FGD helped them to present their views and opinions on present day situation on discrimination, at the very moment they came out with solution on how can it be eradicated or minimized. Discussing further the group came up with an idea how to resolve the economic status of Dalits and the answer was if they are provided skill generating trainings as per present market demand they can improve their life style.

On the other hand, online portals was vastly used to collect data of Dalit population of the research area and the activities previously done my different organizations to up lift the economic condition of Dalits.

## OUTCOMES

FGD served as good platform in term of discussion. In the beginning of the discussion people were hesitant to put forward their views and the discrimination they are facing in the society. It was found that till date no organization has worked in Gunjanagar. I got very good response from the people of Gunjanagar, they were overwhelmed by the fact that with the recommendation of Honorable MP Shiva Kumari Gotame there was someone to conduct research in the area and specially for the benefit of Dalits. In terms of organizations working for Dalits or other field in Gunjanagar beside Ward office, Youth Clubs and few personal cottage industry no other industries were noticed.

**Discrimination:** During Key Informant Interview (KII) On the question how is the discrimination level in the present day context one of the resident replied, “what can I say about this, in this society we all live together with mutual understanding, these days they do not discriminate us, we sit together and eat, we work together and even our kids play together. But, an incident that recently happened in November 2014 has put me in dilemma. My wife was invited to one of upper caste people’s wedding ceremony, she went there happily and they treated her well, she even gave blessings to the newlyweds.” After few seconds of gasp looking at his wife he said, “But later she was asked to take the food when everyone was done eating and to sit separately.” As his wife was nearby I asked her how was the situation and how did she feel? She replied with a smile, “actually I did not feel bad for myself but for them, because I was their guest and we all know guests are like gods in our society (atithi devo vawa) they asking me to take food when everyone else was done, they were not humiliating me but themselves, well i took food and sat there for while but i could not have that food, I left the plate as it was and left the ceremony as well.” Sitting back and recalling that moment how do you feel now? “I felt unwanted as well but thought this is how it has always been, at that moment instead of serving myself in the end, I should have left the ceremony as soon as I was asked to take food in the end.” Further smiling she said, “I wasted the food!”

One of the interviewee, Sita, 14, shared her experience which happened in school. A statement made by her classmate compelled her to fight, "chi, k damai kami jasto baseko hola"( today you look like Damai, Kami"). This statement was made by one of her classmate to another. When the question was put forward how was her friend looking that day? She answered, she did not comb her hair, and looked messy that day, little dirty! This statement is disturbing and frustrating as well. This gives a scenario of how Dalits are portrait. A kid who is studying in school instead of having feeling of unity and similarity, she is making such statement. It is just the society who created such discrimination and we all have to work hard to eradicate discrimination, but instead

she is making such comment in the school to her classmate. Here more than the education of a person the environment s/he is living in and the family background also makes a huge difference.

This above scenario proves that though government has declared there is no more discrimination in the society, it still exists. At some level, upper caste people are decreasing the discrimination practice, inviting her to wedding ceremony and getting blessings from her proves this. But a fourteen year old girl making such statement proves that the practice of discrimination is deeply rooted and it will take few more years to eradicate. Many awareness programs should be conducted in respect to spread message everyone is equal.

During one of the FGD, The irony I heard was, if a Dalits family has some ceremony, even touchable are invited they join the ceremony and eat in their house but the food should have to be cooked by touchable. I would like to emphasize not all touchable in this society discriminates. There are people who sit and eat along with Dalits. Only few does discriminates but it makes a difference on how Dalits feel about themselves. There should be equal treatment for everyone.

**Empowerment:** From FGD and KII on further discussion and upon the query on what can be the reason of discrimination and how can discrimination be decreased most of the FGD members had similar opinion. The social structure that we have which was there from ancient period is the main cause of discrimination. Beside this many other kept forward their viewpoint that, “Dalits are economically weak, and this can be one of the reasons of discrimination, we cannot stand shoulder to shoulder along with those who are economically advanced. There are Dalits who have strong economic background and they are not as much discriminated as us. If there would be the way to up lift our economic condition even we can compete with the society and be able to raise voice against discrimination.”



Conducting Focus Group Discussion

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The FGD helped everyone to come to a solution how the present day situation can be improved. All seven groups came up with various ideas.

**Skill Generating Programs:** Various kinds of skill generating trainings will help the community up lift the current situation. The skills they would learn from trainings can be implemented in various fields where they can generate income. It might be a small initiative but will have long term affect on lives of Dalits. No matter the amount of income would be less but they will be able to contribute in various household daily needs or fulfill their basic necessity. As ninety per cent of the participants were women, providing skill generating training will not only increase the family income but at the same time will increase dependency rate and confidence. At the moment most of their husbands either work in various places around Gunjanagar or they are abroad mainly India. Most of the women in the area are home makers, this gives them leisure time at home so in such case if trainings on sewing, knitting, making various things like candle, soap, aroma incense, etc, beautician trainings and many more will help them utilize their leisure time and at the same time the products can be introduced in the market which will generate income.



A woman knitting a scarf in her leisure time.

**Awareness Programs:** Solely empowering Dalit communities will not assist to eradicate discrimination, additionally the societies so called upper caste people have very important role. Awareness programs should be conducted emphasizing every human being is same to all group of people in the society at same ground. People should be made aware about the government policies for instance according to Article 11(4) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990, *“no person shall be discriminated as untouchable or debarred form attending public places or using things of public utility on the basis of caste. Such an act shall be punishable by law”*. Many people know about this article but no actions are taken on such act, there is huge lack of awareness and government rules. First of all those who are discriminated are afraid to file complains which makes them weak. Among people of society regardless of caste and ethnicity various government policies should be made available to public.

Every year, different trainings are conducted by Government of Nepal (GoN), but people of Gunjanagar were unfamiliar of this. Trainings are conducted only to those who can reach the information and those who are needy are left abandoned. It seems that there is huge gap in information flow form government to public.

On the other hand GoN has been providing incentives for children up to age of 5 who belong to Dalit family. Many participants were seen unaware and those who were aware of this information were not able to receive incentive as they were late to declare it to Ward Office. This shows that public has less access to policy information. Due to these various reasons it is recommended to conduct awareness programs on Government Policies.

**Education System:** From the research it was observed that many of the participants were educated, but they did not have knowledge on Government Policies, people did not have knowledge on where information can be obtained. Government and its policies are important body of any country. One of the major steps can be, introducing Government Policies as one of the course book for students of Secondary Level from which department or ministry of government. Introducing Government Policies on various topics (keeping in mind the level of transparency) as one of the course in secondary level will guide students for their future tracks. On the other hand as an educated member of the family children can surge messages to their entire family.

## LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

Every research work has its own challenges and the lessons can be learned in each and every step. Lessons are outcome of challenges we face. This research has taught me great deal of various things. It has made me professionally qualified. During this research, the challenge faced was to approach the targeted group. The sense of untouchability is deeply rooted; which made them reluctant to share their stories of discrimination they have been facing in present day situation. It was disappointment to see some of the upper caste people did not have friendly relation with their Dalit neighbors (a nearby Bahun neighbor, who are wholesome vegetarian, asked Dalit family to avoid cooking meat and using garlic and onions in their food, as it made pungent smell). It is public's basic right on what they want to eat but in this case the upper caste were making restriction to Dalit family. It is hard to figure out which can be the best approach to create awareness among upper caste people. It appears, more than awareness programs on discrimination to oppressed group suppressed group should be offered with such programs. As a field researcher, community people had high expectation from me personally, they were relying on me within few minutes of conversation that I would help them immediately; it was tough to make them understand my purpose of research and I am none other than a mediator. This shows the dependency nature people have.

It was hard decision to make when people were expecting instant suggestions. As an unauthorized person it would have been inappropriate to give suggestions. However I was able to tackle these situations quite well.

On the other hand, technically it was hard for me to handle FGD solely, I had to play role of moderator and facilitator, which made it difficult to and record the conversation and continue the discussion at the same time. I lost many video recording due to less knowledge on technical field. It would have been a wise step if I was accompanied with an assistant.

When one of the resident of Gunjanagar, a ten years old boy came to ask for my help there occurred the ethical dilemma if I can help him by any means, or if I was being emotional. He is a young boy who has passion and is brilliant in studies and energy of helping himself. He is a differently able boy, he could not walk. He along with his mother approached me if I can help him by any means. I was there for the empowerment of the Disadvantaged group. In a context as he is differently able I thought he was among the Disadvantaged group as well. First of all I tried to convince them saying they have to approach the government agencies, Government Hospital for Disable People. It seemed they have approached thrice but it was hard to get any help from the hospital neither in Kathmandu nor Chitwan. Fortunately I could connect them with one of the NGO working to help differently able people from where he was able to acquire a wheel chair which made his daily life a little convenient.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIVES**

As mentioned above there are many activities that has to be carried out but for the activities to be delivered successfully a proper study has to be carried out. In terms of skill development trainings, a proper market study has to be carried out. If the targeted group is facilitated by skill generating trainings there should be a market where they ought to sell the products. Giving skill generating trainings doesn't create empowerment but a proper mechanism where they can sell the products and generate income. The trainings should be as per the market demand in present context which will widen the opportunity. As per the market study the group of people should be divided, separate trainings can be conducted according to their interest. By doing so, multiple products can be produced covering the wider range of the market. The products can be sold nationally and internationally.

For the empowerment of Dalits, it is important to create awareness in the society (about discrimination) which includes both Dalits and Non Dalits. This will decrease the discrimination faced by Dalits and in term helping in long term development of Dalits and society and Nation as well.

## **Abbreviation**

FGD            Focus Group Discussion

VDC            Village Development Committee

NMA            Naya Muluki Ain

KII            Key Informant Interview

NGO            Non Governmental Organization

HSS            Hindu Social System

GoN            Government of Nepal

## **QUESTIONNAIRE**

- 1. How is it living in this locality?**
- 2. What is the structure of ethnicity?**
- 3. How is the relation among people of other ethnicity?**
- 4. Do you face discrimination?**
- 5. Why do you think discrimination still exists in the society?**
- 6. How can discrimination be decreased?**
- 7. What are the perspectives of empowerment?**
- 8. How can empowerment be generated?**
- 9. What are the possible trainings that Government of Nepal can deliver?**
- 10. How do you see the society if Skill Development Trainings are delivered?**

## Policy Briefs

According to Article 11(4) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990, “no person shall be discriminated as untouchable or debarred from attending public places or using things of public utility on the basis of caste. Such an act shall be punishable by law”.

A directive committee to prepare a national policy and action plan related to disability was formed, and the National Policy and Action Plan--2063 related to disability, presented by Nepal Government, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare. The summary including the main clause related to the working policy, strategy and action plan recommended by the directive committee states: *Provision for free basic health treatment in every government hospital and health center will be made by amending current acts and regulations in order to ensure the rights of the people with disability for medical treatment. Service will be provided by providing separate beds in central, regional and district level hospitals. Special provision will be made in health policy, program preparation and budget, for free treatment and medical investigation. Appropriate resources and means, in addition to policy measures, will be managed in order to provide medical-treatment discounts in private and institutional health centers, and nursing homes.*

*NayaMulukiAin (New Civil Code) of 1962 and the new constitution of 1990 have sought to end caste discrimination. The sub-Article- 4. Focused on Dalits as it ensured that no one shall be discriminated on the basis of caste and creed in public and in the use of public properties; indeed violators shall be punishable by law. The interim Constitution will continue until new Constitution is made by the Constituent Assembly, which is expected to complete as per time comes. It has positive provisions addressing the issues and concerns of the Dalits. Article 14 states: (i) none shall be discriminated based on caste, lineage, community or occupation with any form of untouchability and caste discrimination; such practice of discrimination shall be punishable and the victim shall be compensated as defined by the law; (ii) none shall be deprived from the public services, facilities or public facilities or public places or entering religious places and religious function/ performances; (iii) while producing and distributing and goods, services or facilities, it shall not be limited only for the people of certain caste to buy or sell or distribute such goods, services and facilities; (iv) the feeling and practices of belonging to “higher” caste and demeaning other to “lower” caste or origin, ideas justifying caste based social discrimination, publicity on caste superiority or hatred shall be strongly discouraged; and (v) the practices against above mentioned points shall be punishable.*

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