

GOVERNANCE UNCOVERED EPISODE 60 TRANSCRIPT

From Voters to Leaders? Unpacking Nepal's Quota System

Hello and welcome to Governance Uncovered! This podcast is brought to you by the Governance and Local Development Institute at the University of Gothenburg and supported by the Swedish Research Council.

In today's episode, we have Prakash Bhattarai joining us. Prakash is the Executive Director at the Center for Social Change, a non-profit think-tank based in Kathmandu, Nepal, working on the changing socio-political dynamics of Nepalese society via research, education, advocacy, and community mobilization.

Host Ellen Lust and Prakash met to discuss quotas in Nepal at the local level, particularly quotas for women and the so-called lower castes, known as Dalits.

The discussion is based on Prakash's research that evaluates the impact of Nepal's 2015 constitution, which introduced a federal governance system with quotas to ensure women, Dalits, and other marginalized groups are represented in all levels of government. Prakash argues that constitutionally mandated quotas offer only surface-level representation and don't foster true diversity and inclusion. For genuine representation, marginalized groups need to be part of the decision-making bodies within political parties and civic organizations. Keep listening to hear more about Nepal's quota system and why Prakash argues that social inclusion is crucial for broader democratic engagement.

Hello, my name is Prakash Bhattarai. I'm from Nepal and I'm currently working as an Executive director of Center for Social Change, which is a research and advocacy institute working on issues around governance, peace and citizen engagement in Nepal.

Wonderful. Thank you, Prakash. Thanks for joining us today. I'm excited to talk to you about quotas in Nepal at the local level, particularly quotas for women and for women dalits. If we can start by giving us an understanding of why those quotas got put into play?

There was a lot of demand from the people side that certain segment of the people were not adequately represented in the political decision making process from central to the local level, and Nepal had a 10 years long armed conflict between 1996 till 2006 and there was a big peoples movement in April 2006, so. So basic idea, you know, behind the large number of participation into those political struggle was because they wanted to like people, especially the women, and that it wanted to seek their political, social and economic space in the country and to respect that verdict of the people. So the government of Nepal, while writing a new constitution, came with the idea of the quota system so that women in Dalit can be adequately represented from local level to the national level.

And to be clear, Dalits are the lowest caste, if I understand correctly, is that is that the way to think of them?

Yeah. So it's not, let's say, legal fact, but like it's a kind of a social system that's in place in the country where the lights are considered as a so called lower caste, you know. And and they are the one like. Who are historically marginalized politically, socially as well as economically. So actually the quota system, like while writing the new constitution, there was a strong voice from the Dalit community that they need to be adequately represented because they represent almost 14% of the total countries population. And if you look at their representation at the political arena, which was quite negligible, so there was a demand, you know, and that demand was kind of reflected in the new constitution. And it came out as a mandatory system if there would not be a chorus system, then maybe like again, even after those political changes, they would not be able to secure their position in the political decision making processes.

Now, are Dalits the only marginalized classes? Are the only marginalized group in Nepal?

No. So Dalit is a one group and definitely the women who represent like more than 50% of the total countries population. So if we look at their, you know, representation in the

past, which was quite negligible, you know, still there's not much higher representation, but because of the Cora system, so in the federal and the provincial Parliament now we have 33% of women representation, which is one of the highest in South Asia. And at the local level. So there are quite a number of provisions like for example, if a political party wants to, let's say, nominate a candidate for mayor and deputy mayor position, then one should be women and the women's are also kind of quite marginalized. And also like, you know, we have other minorities. Group some religious minority group like Muslims, and we also have like other ethnic group like the people from Madhu. Who also considered themselves as a historically marginalized and not adequately represented in the decision making processes. So the Dalit, the women, Madhesi, and you know other religious minorities are also there.

And then the quota focused on women and the elite women.

Yeah. So, so when it comes to the local level decision making process. This so it's very much focused on women and dalit. But when it comes to, let's say, the national and the provincial level political decision making process, there's a cluster system through which Madhesi women, the lead and other ethnic group, can also represent in, in the Parliament. So it's it's a different provisions. But but, but the idea behind dedicating core a system for women and Dalits at the very local level is also focused on like preparing leaders at the local level. The more like you prepare leaders at the low. Level to eventually they will develop as a national political leader, so that's the kind of idea behind guaranteeing quota for women. And then it's at the very local level.

I just want to make sure I understand this because of the way I've read the paper that you've presented, which is very, very interesting, is that it's women and but it's also delete women that is not safe for delete men. But there's a seat for delete woman. Is that correct? So why is that? Why is it that the seat for the elites is also been established seat for women and not just for deletes more generally. In other words for men.

So basically, as I already mentioned that the leads are very much marginalized group of the country and even within the lit, the women, the leads are more vulnerable, more marginalized. So the idea, I mean, the political idea behind securing quota for Dalit women. Is to uplift them and try to secure a political space so that they can load their voice. They can bring their issues, they can bring their concerns and even they learn like some political leadership skill. That's the idea behind like securing seats for Dalit

women, though there are quite a number of criticism. You know, around that I mean we are kind of providing space for the little women without adequately preparing them to contest for the election or like enhancing their governance skills. Planning Skills service delivery skills, which are also extremely important, but what we have seen, you know from the last, let's say 8 years is that there has been a lot of concern and attention from the deli to women to a context for the election. So which is very good and and even the political leadership. Has also paid attention like the quantitative representation in the beginning, and eventually that quantitative representations. Will be developed as a kind of a qualitative representation, so that I think the 5 years time to be in a local government and to be the witness of the whole governing processes is extremely enriching experience for them to learn what to do and how to present themselves so that eventually that could be help them to develop. As a as a promising leader at the local level and eventually at the at the national level as.

So that's interesting because I had a slightly worse, cynical interpretation, and I want to know what you think of that, which is that you could also wonder if to some extent allowing delete women space, but not necessarily delete men, was seen as somewhat less threatening, right. So the reason I say that is in 2015. I did a a paper and a research with Amani, Jamel and Lindsay Benstead and we found that secular respondents in Tunisia were more likely to accept Islamist women than in Islamist men. And our interpretation, at least in part, was that Islamist men seemed to be more threatening because they had more power versus Islamist women. Is there any of that that you think is is motivating this?

Yeah.

Yeah. Exactly. I think some, I mean your findings also validate when we analyzed the existing quota system in the country like for example forget about the delete the women Quora. I mean, even the vice mayor position that's kind of a secured for women. And where the mayor, like the the mayor candidate, always look for from a particular political party. Always look for a weak woman to be a vice mayor so that he can monopolize the power that's in the local government. And that's one thing and even like in the case of the women. Securing quota for the little women, it can be a kind of hidden interest of political parties that, if they could have. Less powerful women in the government, you know, decision making bodies. Then the man from the upper caste, the so called upper caste can monopolize the power. So that could be the one. And like in my paper also I have clearly written that I mean I interviewed one of the women in one of the mid heel part of the. Country from where the Maoist armed conflict was originated and she said that like our signature works, but our voice did not. The signature can be used like for decision making process. But when they raise their voice to have something in that particular decision. Then it's not been listened to most extent

like it's a it's a right that the powerless women are now represented, but at the same time, it's also the fact that in some places it was also very difficult for political parties to find Dalit women to be represented. And I kind of analyzed the data from 2017 local election and compared with the 2020 to election. So there were less number of the lead women elected or like some of the you know Dalit women quota were just not. Filled because there was not much interest, you know? So it was also like the situation. But in 2022 election more Dalit women quota is fulfilled.

Which may get us back to this question of how women are learning and how it's becoming more accepted before we get there, though you mentioned the vice mayors and the mayors and.

Yeah, yeah.

Want to focus a little bit on the the loopholes that you point to? Also in the paper, for example, you make the point that either the mayor or the vice mayor needs to be a woman, but that as you just alluded to, often the position that that the parties are are putting them in. Is this the vice mayor and not the mayor? But you also point to the idea that you're supposed to have 2 women that your party is running, right? But then, if I understand correctly, that if you're. Not running the full number of seats that you don't have to have 2 women, right? So you show how that means that in times you get a male mayor and vice mayor because parties essentially run together. Can you say a little bit more about that?

Yeah. Yeah. So that's that's one of the loophole. Like when I was doing my research and it's only like everyone were appreciating this quota system that its political party has to nominate one male and one female for the top most position at the at the local government. So everyone were appreciating. And it was a time like where the the coalition culture among political parties was not actually in place, but like in 2022, local government election, the coalition culture came in. And then we kind of identified the the loop for that, you know, or you could just nominate one man. Because there is not a problem in the Constitution that if you are nominating, let's say only one candidate, then who should be there? Should it be? And if there would be a constitutional provision that if you are nominating just one candidate, then that should be of woman. And then maybe nobody would do. It would be, yeah, they they would be. The political party would be in problem. You know, I think they have smartly met that provision in the Constitution, or maybe they even hadn't thought about that. This kind of coalition culture will flourish in the country. So that what I kind of feel is that. The constructor

need to be amended to have a more sophisticated, more progressive quota system. If a political party wants to have only one candidate for those 2 top position, then that should be women you know. So in that. Way the quota system could be more progressive. The second one that I found during my research is that a lot of like representative that I talked across the country, they proposed some sort of affirmative action within the political parties because it's a political party who make ultimate decision, who is going to. Run for those positions and there's no, let's say such kind of standard practices within political party where they can actually have like more women or more. Dalit and like have more candidates beyond the quota system. So that's also been one of the problem because unless political parties doctor or they're, you know, candidate selection processes cannot be improved, then just quota system cannot be supportive for women in the. To be adequately represented at the local government parties. So that's that's one of my argument in the paper.

So you mentioned the sort of party gatekeepers as being in one of the reasons why we don't have more women or or delayed women running. But can you also point us to the other, the other barriers that exist for women to run as candidate?

So there are 2 like kind of in a broader picture, there are 2 barriers, so one is the barrier that's been created by the political parties. And the second one is the social inclusion process of the. Country because on the one hand, like you have all these quotas and everything, but like on the other hand, you're not really preparing a competent women and delete candidate actually to fill that quota, but in a very competitive way, you know. So it's a kind of hand-picked system, you know. So I think the first thing is if we want to change it now, then I think the best way to start would be changing the the political decision making processes on the country. And having more voice of women and Dalit in the candidate selection processes. So that's one of the very important but if you want to look at the changes in the long run then I think the the state, the country needs to invest a lot on the social inclusion process that means investing on education. Investing on capacity development, making like women economically stronger so they can compete for the election. So when I was doing my research, I found like quite a number of constraining factors like for example. The finance the election is becoming quite expensive day by day, and it requires a lot of money to run for the election, no matter whether it's local election or it is a federal election. So whereas women and Dalits are generally do not have. Strong economical background, so political parties always prefer to those like who can actually finance themselves in their elections. So election financing is is one of. The the very constraining factors or effective women and the legal representation, the second one is the psychology. I mean, are they really prepared for taking that role because when you are elected, you have to listen to thousands of

people of your constituency of your local government unit and. Are you really ready and are you really psychologically prepared to to take that position? So I think that's also very important. This 3rd one is like these access and leverage factors as already. Means and that are they really capable enough to to influence the decision of the political parties at different levels. So normally like this top most local government positions are decided by the Central Committee. Do they have a voice or can they influence these central committee leadership or the top level political leadership? And even like other committees, you know? Like the local communities and the provincial communities and district communities, so do they really have access? Do they really have, like, liveries to influence those decision making bodies? And also like, you know, the lack of affirmative actions, as I already mentioned, which is also very important, that it's political part. He has to have a policy where they can make a decisions beyond the quota system, you know, so if you just like kind of maintain that quota system, then maybe like the chains that we're achieving through quota system will be so slow. If we really want to have a very kind of progressive, let's say, representative. System. Then there needs to be some kind of. I mean, that's just a state based affirmative action is not enough. So I think it has to be practiced by those political institutions like political parties that I mentioned. And also the issue of trust when there is a deputy mayor in position, even mayor, I mean, even the mayor like I've interacted like some of the mayor women mayor, some of the Dalit mayors and especially in the case of women mayor. So the whole family support them in the case of deputy mayor in many cases. It's their husband. It's her husband or it's her son. Actually doing all the kind of disease. Reasons and see just the one like to sign there. You know? So. So that's also like their leadership, you know, they're this isn't making, let's say capability is not trusted by the society. And even if they contest with the election, let's say with the man they and there is a kind of perception among the people that ohh can women take the mirror. Jason, you know, can women take the world chair position? So I think the issue of trust is also there that has to be at.

Do they have? Political knowledge and the reason I'm asking that is Adam Auerbach and some of his colleagues have done research and they're looking in India in this case and at small towns. And they argue that one of the challenges also faced by women there and as well as other marginalized and less included groups. Is the lack of knowledge about how the process should work about what the rules and regulations are, and therefore their ability to respond to constituents, to help provide services, etcetera. Do we see the same thing happening in the?

Actually, when it comes to knowledge, even the man elected representative do not have adequate knowledge how to effectively learn the local government in the changed governance context of the country. When we interact them, what they say to me is that

OK, you know, the last 5 years was quite a good learning for us. So even they don't have knowledge. I mean even they don't have a knowledge. But The thing is they have got that exposure. And that connects, you know and and the connections and that has really helped them build their capacity and knowledge within a very short period of time. But like in the case of women first, like they have a family Perier, you know, to to run for the elections, then they have this political barrier. The party barriers to get the ticket to to run the the positions. And then once they're elected, then there is a broader societal barrier that their work. The decisions are not trusted and some I have noticed, like some of the, you know, deputy mayor. Now elected as a mayor, have done a fantastic job. And they are even better than many other, you know, male mayors across the country. So I think what we really need is the exposure when it comes to their political knowledge, that the governing knowledge, I think women in Nepal have seen, you know, the conflicts, the conscious and making process the. Revolution. So they have witnessed all these different political events that have taken place in in the country. So from that process they have learned a lot, you know, like what to do and what. To do, but it just a space which they are not getting and also kind of a a support structure which they are needed to perform effectively. I think that supposed structure is not there. So how to create that kind of support structure that could be let's say regular mentors say or kind of advisory. Support. So I took to one of the deputy mayor in one of the local government unit and. Said that, if I could have one legal like a permanent a full time legal adviser, I would be perfectly doing my role, but the local government budget does not allow her to have a full time legal adviser so that every time when or when she has to make a decision, she always has to. Think about whether she will be caught by these anti corruption body or like whether that will be unconscious on decision which will eventually be let's say decided by the court as unconstitutional. Because of all those barriers, he is not able to, let's say, make decisions. The kind of decisions that she wants to make. So there are like hundreds of examples. What I really needed at present for especially for women As for my interaction, is that not every woman has a strong support. Structure and advisory support that could help them to make decisions in favor of the. People.

How much does that need to be at the local level in the sense that, could you imagine organization or a body that women, mayors and other women representatives could send queries to and get responses for when we're talking especially about legal regulations and that type of information?

Yeah, because as per the new Constitution of Nepal, 2015. Local government also has a rule, a law making role and to formulate laws, different laws and policies. You have to have a certain knowledge, right? I mean, you have to have that legal knowledge. You you

need to understand the overall law making processes and you also need to let's say, formulate laws that does not contradict with. The. Law that's been formulated by the province and the federal government, you know, so you you really need to be very attentive. And as a peoples representative, you cannot just sit at the table and go through all those provisions because you have to deal with like several other problems confronted by the society. So to do that, you need to have that and there are some international organizations, like some donor community providing capacity, building support to deputy mayor so that they could perform well. But that support is not enough because as per my interactions with many elected deputy mayor, so it's a kind of a one off training like for 3 days and 5 days but without regular follow up it has to be like a 5 years kind of consistent support so that they can do well. The second one is like some of these kind of celebrity deputy mayor, who has received a lot of exposure, you know in their terrier or like the deputy mayor from. More resourceful local government because the local government also has a a different resource strength. You know, like for example, if you talked about Kathmandu Metropolitan City. So they have way better resources than a rural municipality somewhere in the far western part of Nepal. You know, especially the deputy mayor from the more resourceful. You know, local government. Unit have received more support, more exposure than the women from those, you know, rural municipalities where donors or international organizations and other organizations rarely reach. So I think how to bridge that gap so that all these deputy mayors can have, like, consistent support. Throughout the 10 years, so I think if we could be able to do that, then maybe like in 5 years time frame. I think there would be a radical shift in terms of women representation. That's that's what I'm I'm kind of seeing based on my interactions with with these leaders, local government leaders.

That's excellent. And you're right. In some ways, the quotas are aimed at not only getting women in power today, right, but also giving women the chance to show that they can do well, right. And without the proper infrastructure and support to be able to succeed. Lead then those lessons, which can ultimately change how people think about women, about moving from descriptive representation, women 's bodies and offices to them actually having voice like you said in in kind of a substantive representation of women 's interests and deletes, interests needs to have the proper support to allow them to succeed.

That's true. Yeah, that's that's extremely important. And I think one area of support is a knowledge support, which is very, very important, because our society is a progressive. But, you know, it's not as progressive as, let's say, the Western Society. What they need first is a knowledge support. The second one is, let's say. We're practicing this modern governance, right, but at the same time, we're also practicing the social governance,

the cultural governance, you know, and sometimes. There's more than governance practices are dominated by the social and the cultural governance, and I have noticed, like a lot of these women and delete representatives are kind of struggling to make a balance between their role to do better in practicing this modern form of government. Against these social and cultural form of governance, you know, so I think we need to kind of provide them some sort of knowledge and strategy so that they could, you know, stand somewhere in between and and make a balance, you know, between these 2 form of governance that that I've seen.

Because I just. Yeah. So the way I think of that is that women have a role in the state, right? They are role as as a mayor or deputy mayor. They also have a role as a mother, as a daughter, as a wife. They have cultural roles. If we can think of that right. And if I'm understanding you correctly, I mean, part of the challenge when we're saying, OK, a woman is in power, but really it's her husband and their family that's making the decision is that. Within that realm, she's not necessarily the primary decision maker, so in some ways it's straddling that or how allowing them to think about how to straddle that. But it's also about giving them enough support and enough incentives within their role as a state to be able to move fully into that role and not to be as constrained by their rule in the other sort of sets of social institutions and arenas in which they're engaged.

Yeah. No, that's that's absolutely true. And in addition to that, when you are a mayor or deputy mayor, a word chair, generally the. Modern in a in a modern form of governance like the law guides you, you know the rules, guides you, the regulation guides you, the policy guides you, whereas like when you're practicing like social governance or the cultural governance.

The application.

Really conscious about all these laws and policies and regulations, you know, and you start making decisions. OK, I know that person and that person voted me during the election, so. I have to compromise the law or I have to compromise the policy. So when you start like doing it, then you cannot perform well and you have a high chance of being corrupt or like, you know, being caught by the anti corruption, birdies, mismanagement of the fund and you're not adequately. Allocating resources where there is a need rather like you start focusing on the Community from where you secured a good number of vote during elections you know. So I think if you really want to be effective like as a local government leader, you have to stick. To the laws and policies and you have to build a system that could be practiced by your successor. I just want to give an example of this judicial committee. So every local government in Nepal has a provision of judicial committee. It's it's a kind of quasi you know. Judicial birdie. Where you you make the decisions of the local disputes and the people file the dispute into that Judicial committee and Judicial Committee has to make decisions and especially and that

comes under the judicial deputy. Mirror and most of the deputy mirrors are women, but in many local government units, when I interacted with the chair of Judicial committee. They are having a hard time to make decisions though. They know like who is wrong and who is right and they know like how to resolve a conflict. But they do it, then they'll lose their voters, they they lose their supporters. You know, the social governance side and the vote politics has kind of hindering, you know, their. Ability to to be an effective lawmakers at the local level.

Can you tell me why this is a problem more for women than it is for men?

I think women are more emotional and more conscious and and sometimes like they're not while making the decisions, they just don't take a very much law based decision. You know, they also look at other, let's say practical aspect. And as already mentioned that they're not just there because sometimes they're backed by. Their huh. Men back by their son and maybe like they're also kind of putting pressure on her not to make a decision, you know, not to make a a quick decision. So that I think they have been influenced by other groups. And sometimes she tried to be very practical because she's a woman. She's a mother, you know, I think that's also the reason. But like in most cases, they said that it's a vote politics that. If the group who supported them during election have done something wrong, then it's very hard for them to make decisions on against them.

So there's 2 questions this raises to me. One is when we're talking about the women are maybe more beholden to their son or to their fathers or their husbands in some ways, that strikes me that women, this gets back to the point that women are less powerful than men, right? Not necessarily that they have a different way of seeing things, but they're also in some ways. More constrained. But the second question it raises for me is a question of when we talk about who their voters are, to what extent is that in Nepal based on other types of connections? So for example, in Jordan, we've spent a lot of time or elsewhere a lot of the support for different candidates comes from members of their. Other communities, so you know of their families or otherwise who think that, OK, you're you're going to be elected. And once you're elected, you're going to help me because. Is not necessarily just because I voted for you, but I voted for you because I know you'll help me because we're of the same family or we're somehow otherwise. Yeah. Related to each other is that taking place here?

Yeah. So Nepal is still a communal society. So where people vote based on a group decision rather than their own individual decision. So that's that's a kind of a. And in a communal society, the caste matters. The family matters. The class matters, you know, so all these play a very important role when it comes to supporting a particular candidate. You know, that's quite frequent, but that practice has been sifting slightly. Which we noticed in 2022 elect local government elections where especially in the city areas where like people are not so much connected to each other. So in Kathmandu

Metropolitan City Independent candidate won the the mayoral position. 2 other independent candidates won the local government election, so that means in city areas where people are not so connected, so integrated, so they kind of vote based on their. On let's say individual decision, whereas in a in a village areas you know in a remote area. Where people vote, a person who belongs to their caste and ethnic group or or or family family connection. So I think takes a while to to chase that that pattern because it's it's a it's a long process and I again you know wants to emphasize the importance of social inclusion. Until and unless you are investing into education and the financial empowerment of the people. They cannot make an independent decision. I think the more people make independent decisions, there is a high chance of having better candidate. If I have to envision, let's say the the effectiveness of quota system in Nepal. I would say, let's say 5 Dalit candidates competing for one position. Highly competent. 5 daily candidates competing for a quota or like 10 women competing for the quota and the same women, let's say competing for the general the the positions, you know that are available at the local levels. When we reach that position, we don't reach to that position when we are not actually investing into. The social inclusion process, so that's a kind of missing, you know element and I think we need to we need to work on that.

Thank you. That I think that's a great place to stop because it really does bring together interest that people have in terms of just promoting social welfare generally, right. And thinking about how we improve and and raise up women 's and delete and other marginalized groups representation. As well as their real their real.

Voice. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, Ellen, for hosting me. And it is real pleasure talking to you.

Thank you for being here, it's great to see you.

Yeah. Thank you.

Thank you for listening. More information about Prakash and Center for Social Change can be found in the description below.

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We'll take a short summer break and return with a new episode in September. Wishing you a great summer, take care!