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## School Dropout Among Dalit Students: Trends and Causes in Molung Rural Municipality

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### Abstract

*The school dropout rate of Dalit children in Nepal is higher than that of the upper castes. The main objective of this paper is to find out the rate and reasons for Dalit children dropping out of school. Molung Rural Municipality has been selected as the study area. The school dropout rate has been calculated based on the school enrollment records within the rural municipality. Interviews were conducted with the parents of students who dropped out of school to determine the reasons for dropping out. Similarly, interviews have been conducted with key informants. It has been argued that the crisis in the patron-client relationship determines the tendency of Dalit children to drop out of school. It has been found that they cannot continue their education because they have problems fulfilling the necessities such as food, and clothing. Education is a necessity after the need for food is met. All family members should give priority to providing food. Therefore, they are forced to drop out of school because they leave their studies and go to work. The main finding of this article is that children are forced to drop out of school due to being forced to play the role of helpers in household chores and working as daily wage laborers*

**Keywords:** Dalit student, dropout, wage labor, lack of basic needs, low priority on education, and early marriage, Bista system.

### Introduction

Nepal is practicing a federal democratic republican political system. The educational system was restructured according to the federal system. Dalit community was deprived of education in various historical periods. Based on the Constitution of Nepal 2072, the federal, provincial, and local levels have used state

power. The right to education is considered a fundamental right granted by the Constitution. To ensure equal access to education for all, basic and secondary education will now be directed by the Local Level Government. There is a total of 22 single authority areas in the Local Level Government. Article 31 provides

education-related rights and all its five sub-articles provide for education. In sub-section 1, it is mentioned that it is the responsibility of the state to provide every citizen with easy access to education up to the basic level. It has been eight years since the local level has been practicing the rights and responsibilities according to the constitution. The local-level government has been making and implementing the necessary laws. They are issuing and implementing the necessary laws to operate and manage basic and secondary education under a single authority. In this context, the state of education in Molung Rural Municipality and the efforts being made are mentioned in this article.

As defined by the Civil Act of B.S.1910, the community considered untouchable in society and excluded from the mainstream of the state socially, economically, politically, educationally, and religiously are called *Dalit* castes. Dalits are divided into hill and Madhesi Dalits. *Gandharva, Pariyar, Badi, Vishwakarma, Mizar, Poda, and Chyame* are called Hill Dalit, and *Musahar, Teli, Khatwe, Dom, Tatma, Batar, Natuwa*, etc. are called Madhesi Dalit (National Dalit Commission Nepal).

The education domain index consists of the adult literacy index, the net enrollment index, and the basic education completion rate index. CDSA (2014) presents the Hill Brahmins have the highest Education domain index, Hill Dalits have index scores below the national average such as Kamis have 0.43, Damais have 0.42, etc. In contrast, Tarai Dalits have a score of 0.2733 in the lowest position. Dalit About 15% of hill Dalits and 44% of Tarai Dalits are landless in Nepal, where land ownership is a sign of wealth, power, and social status (CBS, 2002).

Dalits tend to work in traditional occupations under exploitative and discriminatory illnesses despite the abundance of skills related to these industries. The shift from a traditional to a modern market economy has reduced their products, knowledge, and skills without offering them new employment options. The Dalit population is composed of about 54% farmers, 15.7% service workers, 14.2% non-farm wage earners, and 6.1% casual farm laborers and another low-wage worker (Sharma et al., 1994).

Atreya et al. (2023) examine the income deprivation among Dalits in Nepal. Dalits have significantly higher non-farm income than farm income. Being a single woman head of household or having a member with chronic illness reduces household income. Agricultural and non-farm opportunities should be integrated for economic growth, especially for vulnerable Dalits. This can improve Dalit inclusion and reduce income inequality.

It has been almost two decades since the nature of the Nepalese state turned inclusive, especially in its initiatives to include the marginalized Dalit community in the mainstream. Indeed, studies have indicated that exclusionist policies of the state left Dalit communities behind. Although the state has implemented broad-based inclusive policies and all three tiers of government have been legislating and making rules and plans for improving Dalits' educational prospects, the results are not uniformly promising. While the enrollment rates of Dalit students have risen, the rate of dropouts remains alarmingly high. So, there is a need to research the school dropout of Dalit students. It is an interesting research topic to discuss the cause of the dropout of Dalit students.

#### **Statement of the Problems**

The state alone cannot be held responsible in the current scenario. We often hear that we live in an era of Dalit inclusion.

But one may wonder why Dalit students do not stay at school. Why is Dalit participation in education not improving? Even after implementing the Samovashi policy, little improvement has been made in the educational status of Dalits. Some studies show that dropout rates among Dalit students remain high and report that quotas for Dalits are not being respected in the recruitment of civil servants. That has triggered debates on abolishing the Dalit quota, with some arguing that reservation should focus on education instead. Others contend that job reservations are irrelevant if the community is unprepared. Moreover, some even claim that the community lacks awareness. While social researchers often mention low economic conditions as a contributing factor, they often overlook the historical context that has brought about this economic marginalization. Without a look into the historical process that has weakened the Dalit community economically, it is tough to comprehend the actual underlying issues. This often leaves Dalits with minimal land ownership, directly affecting their livelihoods and overall well-being. Besides, discrimination and uneven access to education have made the rate of dropout among Dalit students a big problem, especially in community schools. Even though the rate has slowly gone down in recent years, there are still a large number of Dalit students outside of school.

Scholars have given their definitions of the caste system. Weber has defined the caste system as the basis of social stratification. It is an ideal type of stratification. It is a status group with the same social status or position and social strata. It is a structure created by idealism. It establishes social differentiation. Honor, prestige, and respect create a group with a social status or position. It assigns a person a rank, power, and social status by birth (Weber, 1978 as cited in Berg, 2023). The caste is a hierarchical system. It is a system of religious rather than political feelings that rank individuals. Religious ideology divides people into hierarchical systems based on the concept of pure and impure. Similarly, it separates the people into hierarchical chains of status and power. Even though people are divided into pure and impure, there is an interdependent relationship between the upper and lower caste. Each caste is interconnected as a unit. They are interconnected to make society whole (Dumont, 1980). The caste system provides hierarchical hereditary membership. The caste hierarchy differentiates evaluation, rewards, and favors (Béteille, 1965). Interaction and interrelationships are built based on innate stratification (Bereman, 1967). The hierarchical chain assigns rigid, irreversible positions tied to traditional caste occupations (Leach, 1967).

Cameron (1995) states the change in the patron-client relationship between the upper and Dalit caste. In particular, there has been a change in the caste division of labor that Dalit women have to do. After the change in caste occupations, there has been labor migration of young Dalit men to India. She argues that this has improved the role of Dalit women and the socio-economic condition of Dalit women by renting land from upper-caste farmers since Dalits do not own cultivable land. But she does not even imagine a situation where Dalit youth do not have seasonal labor migration to India. There is no mention of the problem of Dalits who go to India to work as wage laborers and do not earn money. Moreover, there is silence on the impact of adopting wage labor occupations on obtaining education. It is necessary to study the fact that Dalit participation in the education sector is still low due to the crisis in caste occupations and the compulsion to change occupations to fulfill daily foodstuffs. It is a universal belief that

food is necessary for survival. Therefore, people give priority to the task of obtaining food. Only after fulfilling basic needs, can people fulfill their need for education. According to Maslow's theory, there are five types of human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-realization. Higher-level needs cannot be satisfied until lower-level needs like food, water, and safety are satisfied (Maslow, 1943, cited by Mariano et al. (2023).

As the traditional professions of the Dalit community gradually weakened, Dalit youth were forced to work in wage labor and other sectors. This aspect has been given little attention in studies and research. The weakening caste-based occupations are becoming problematic for making their livelihood. The compulsion to always look for work to cope with having to travel for a living impact acquiring an education. However, there have been few studies and research on this. Due to the weak economic situation, people are forced to leave their studies early. The following research questions have arisen:

- What is the trend of school dropout among Dalit students of Molung Rural Municipality?
- What are the main causes of Dalit students' school dropout?
- How do social, and economic factors affect Dalit students' dropout rates?

Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to analyze the factors affecting school dropout rates among Dalit students in Molung Rural Municipality and to understand the wider impact of economic and social factors on their education. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To describe the trend of school dropout among Dalit students of Molung Rural Municipality.
- To find out the main causes of Dalit students' school dropout.

-To examine the social, and economic factors that affect Dalit students' dropout rates.

Research Methods

A mixed-methods research approach has been employed to address the research questions. This study focuses on a specific geographical area, namely Molung Rural Municipality. In analyzing the trend of Dalit student dropouts, the enrollment rate of Dalit students over the last three years was taken from the office of the Molung Rural Municipality. The parents of the dropout students were selected as respondents to identify the main causes of dropouts. Since the number of such parents was not certain, a purposive sampling method was used to select 22 respondents for the study. Data on the causes of dropout rates were collected using a structured interview guide. Interviews were stopped when similar responses started to recur, indicating data saturation. The study adopts both qualitative and quantitative data. Answers to the third research question about social and economic factors related to dropout rates were derived from in-depth interviews with parents and key informant interviews with local stakeholders and educators.

Dalit Educational Status in Molung Rural Municipality

Molung Rural Municipality is one of the rural municipalities in the Okhaldhunga district. It is located in a rural area. The Dalit population in this rural municipality is significant. According to the National Census 2078, the Dalit population is 12.34 percent of the total population. In this rural municipality, 70% of the population over the age of 5 years is literate. (National Statistics Office, 2023).

The literacy rate among the Hill Dalit group of Nepal is 75.5% while the literacy rate for the Madhesh/Tarai Dalit group is 51.9%. Similarly, the literacy rate among the Hill Dalit group of Okhaldhunga district is 69.9 % (National Statistics Office, 2023). The literacy rate of Dalits in Molung Rural Municipality is lower than that of Okhaldhunga District. The details of literacy by caste ethnicity are given in Table No. 1.

Table no. 1: Literacy status by caste Ethnicity of Molung Rural Municipality

Caste/Ethnicity	Can read & write	Can read-only	Cannot read & write	Total	Literacy rate
Hill Caste	3813	6	1257	5076	75.1
Madhesh/Tarai Caste	9	0	4	13	69.2
Mountain/Hill Janajati	6159	8	2091	8258	74.6
Hill Dalit	1243	1	609	1853	67.1
Others	3	0	0	3	100.0
Total	11227	15	3961	15203	73.8

Source: National Statistics Office, 2023.

The table shows the literacy rates for the various caste groups. The highest literacy rate is 75.1% for the Hill Caste and 74.6% for the Mountain/Hill Janajati. The literacy percentage for the All Caste group is 73.8%. Hill Dalit groups have lower literacy rates of 67.1%. It indicates that Hill Dalits may not have as much access to literacy programs and educational opportunities as other caste groups with better literacy rates.

Table no. 2: Enrollment and dropout rate of Molung Rural Municipality

Grade	Enrollment 2020			Enrollment 2021			Upgrade			Drop out		
	Girl	Boy	Total	Girl	Boy	Total	Girl	Boy	Total	Girl	Boy	Total
ECD	54	67	121	55	65	120						

One	53	43	96	48	42	90	-6	-25	-31	11.11	37.31	25.62
Two	33	38	71	42	38	80	-11	-5	-16	20.75	11.63	16.67
Three	35	34	69	31	34	65	-2	-4	-6	6.06	10.53	8.45
Four	28	19	47	34	22	56	-1	-12	-13	2.94	35.29	18.84
Five	24	34	58	40	27	67	+12	+8	+20	no	drop	out
Six	23	28	51	19	32	51	-5	-2	-7	20.83	5.88	12.07
Seven	20	27	47	20	23	43	-3	-5	-8	13.04	17.86	15.69
Eight	30	21	51	26	27	53	+6	0	+6			
Nine	28	26	54	32	22	54	+2	+1	+3			
Ten	12	10	22	24	19	43	-4	-7	-11	18.18	26.92	20.37
Eleven	12	6	18	18	15	33	+6	+5	+11			
Twelve	16	20	36	19	13	32	+7	+7	+14			
Total	368	373	741	408	379	787						
Total of without ECD				353	314	667	-15	-59	-74	4.08	15.82	9.97

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

Table 2 shows the dropout rate for Molung Rural Municipality based on the number of student enrollments in 2020 and 2021. There has been an increase in the total enrolment rate. The number of students enrolled in 2020 has increased from 741 to 787 in 2021. It shows that the number of students enrolled has increased overall over the years. When presenting the dropout rate by grade, the highest dropout rate is from ECD to Grade One. Of the students studying ECD in 2020, 25.62% did not enroll in school in 2021. Among these non-enrollees, the number of boys is higher at 37.31%. This is almost four times more than girls which is 6. The dropout rate for boys is higher than that of girls. The dropout rate is lower in Grade Two compared to Grade One. The dropout rate for girls is 20.75% while that for boys is 11.63%. It shows that girls are more likely to drop out than boys. In Grade 4, 18.84% of students dropped out. It is one of the grades with the highest dropout rate. The dropout rate of boys is higher than that of girls, which is 35.29% compared to 2.94% for girls. No students dropped out of school in Grade Five. The student enrollment rate is higher than in the year of 2020. In Grade 7, 15.69 percent of the total Dalit students have dropped out of school. Boys account for 17.86% and girls for 13.04% of the dropouts. No students dropped out of school in grades 8 and 9. In grade 10, 20.37% of boys dropped out of school. Of these, 26.92% were boys and 18.18% were girls. The dropout rate is shown in the table below based on the number of student enrolments in 2021 and 2022.

**Table no. 3: Enrollment and dropout rate of Molung Rural Municipality**

Grade	Enrollment 2021			Enrollment 2022			Upgrade			Drop out		
	Girl	Boy	Total	Girl	Boy	Total	Girl	Boy	Total	Girl	Boy	Total
ECD	55	65	120	50	53	103						
One	48	42	90	35	28	63	-20	-37	-57	36.36	56.92	47.5
Two	42	38	80	34	37	71	-14	-5	-19	29.17	11.90	21.11
Three	31	34	65	40	34	74	-2	-4	-6	4.76	10.53	7.50
Four	34	22	56	29	22	51	-2	-12	-14	6.45	35.29	21.54
Five	40	27	67	36	27	63	+2	+5	+7			
Six	19	32	51	32	29	61	-8	+2	-6	-20	+7.41	8.96
Seven	20	23	43	21	24	45	+2	-8	-6	+10.53	-25.00	11.76
Eight	26	27	53	19	21	40	-1	-2	-3	5.00	8.70	9.30
Nine	32	22	54	25	24	49	-1	-3	-4	3.85	11.11	7.55
Ten	24	19	43	31	18	49	-1	-4	-5	3.13	18.18	9.26
Eleven	18	15	33	14	17	31	-10	-2	-12	41.67	10.53	27.91
Twelve	19	13	32	17	14	31	-1	-1	-2	5.56	6.67	6.06



	408	379	787	383	348	731						
				333	295	628	-75	-84	-159	18.38	22.16	20.20

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

Table 3 presents the enrollment and dropout rates of ECD to 12 grades for two years (2021 and 2022). The total enrollment decreased slightly from 787 in 2021 to 731 in 2022. The dropout rate is high in class 1, class 11, class 4, class 2, class 7, class 8, and class 10, its percentage is 47.5%, 27.91%, 21.54%, 21.11%, 11.76%, 9.30%, and 9.26% respectively. Boys have the highest dropout rates in Class 1, Class 4, Class 7, and Class 10, which are 56.92%, 35.29%, 25.00%, and 18.18% respectively. Boys have a higher dropout rate than girls from Grades 7 to 10. Girls drop out of school at a lower rate than boys. However, girls drop out of school at a higher rate in grades two, six, and eleven, which are 29.17%, 20.00%, and 41.67%, respectively.

#### The causes of school dropout of Dalit Students

Poverty, early marriage, a lack of resources, and cultural norms are the main causes of high school dropout in rural areas of Nepal. Socioeconomic difficulties have a special impact on girls' schooling (Lagun & Shah, 2024). Dalit students continue to drop out of community schools due to they have poor economic conditions and receive insufficient financial support. Scholarships are not enough to cover the expenses of school (Mishra, 2023). The causes of Dalit students' dropout in previous studies are different but the causes of the dropout are as follows:

**Table no. 4: Distribution of the respondents by the causes of school dropout of Dalit students.**

S. N..	Cause of dropout	Respondent	Percent
1	Wage labour	6	27.27
2	Lack of basic needs	8	36.36
3	Low priority on education	5	22.73
4	Early marriage	3	13.64
	<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

The table shows the four major causes of school dropouts among Dalit students, which are wage labor, lack of basic needs, low priority on education, and early marriage. Out of the total respondents, 27.27 % respondent said that the cause of the Dalit student school dropout is engaging in wage labor. Many Dalit students are engaged in wage labor as an economic compulsion to support the financial needs of their families. Such an economic compulsion disrupts their chances of attending school regularly and forces them to choose between work and education. Out of the total respondents, 36.36% of the respondents said that the main reason for Dalit students dropping out is lack of basic needs. This is the reason given by the largest number of respondents. Similarly, the respondents who gave low priority to education and early marriage as reasons for dropping out were 22.73% and 13.64% respectively.

#### Social, and economic factors that affect Dalit students' dropout rates

Project Development for Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy (LARRP) 2015 Policy has taken a policy to design development projects and more inclusive programs for project-affected tribals. It has been mentioned that there should be a program to improve the socio-economic status. It is mentioned that a livelihood restoration plan is necessary to maintain the standard of living of tribes or marginalized tribal groups, and additional assistance will be given as per the provisions.

#### Long-Term Effects of Patron-Client Relationships

The mode of peasant or domestic production is mainly between households and relatives, and the production relationship is between households and kin. Similarly, market relationships are non-market patron-client relationships between occupational and upper castes. This characteristic has changed in the mode of production (Blaikie et al. 2002). Nepali society is now in a state

where world capitalism has affected it. This situation is breaking down the relationship between patron-client relationships. The patron-client relationship is mainly found in the feudal mode of production. In this regard, the statement of one respondent is as follows:

Thirty-five *Bista* houses were allotted to my share. I equally divided thirty *Bista* houses to my three sons. And I kept five houses of *Bistas*. *Bista Pratha* alone was not enough to feed us. Since our ancestors, our work was to make iron tools. My sons did not study. I did not study either. Now our *Bistas* have stopped harvesting crops. Fewer people do farming. The *Bisti* tradition is now disappearing. That is why we have to struggle to feed ourselves. How to study? When boys reach the age of adolescence, they leave home to work as wage laborers. They drop out of school. What is the use of studying?

The *Balighare* system is a source of traditional livelihood for Dalits. The word *Bista* means the families of the upper caste to whom Dalits extend their services in the form of making different types of handicrafts. The services are inherited by the sons, and with the division of shares amongst the sons, the size of the *Bista* household gradually shrinks. Furthermore, as the *Bista* families are increasingly abandoning the agricultural laborers, the *Balighare* system is at the crossroads about its very collapse.

In the *Balighare* system, the *Bistas* provide goods and grains to the Dalit families twice a year, which is called *Bali*. Traditionally, the Dalit communities derived a source of livelihood from this *Balighare* system since they would depend on the produce that comes from the *Bali* system. With the deterioration of this system, Dalits are confronting huge challenges in sustaining their livelihoods. Young members of the Dalit families are searching for

alternative sources of livelihood. To cope with the crisis, they have increasingly migrated away from their traditional homes in search of work and opportunities beyond the agricultural and craft-based economy that once supported their communities.

There are differences among Dalits and non-Dalits in income, landholding, participation in markets, and social life in Nepal. The incidence of income poverty is around 46 percent for Dalits, whereas it is only 18 percent in the case of high-caste people (World Bank, 2006). According to Wily et al. (2008), Dalits are also land-poor and frequently rent (more) land, usually from high-caste households who have extra land. Karki (2024) concludes that the probability of poverty will increase by 1.533 times due to Dalits being a lower caste and by 3.65 times due to having daily labor as the primary source of income. Many dependent and subsistence farming families also fall under the trap of poverty. In Nepal, lower-caste families are poorer than upper-caste households. Lower caste households own less land, are less involved in animal husbandry, and have less access to employment (Aryal & Holden, 2013). Ambedkar argues that the economic capacity of untouchable castes is weak due to a lack of capital. They were forced to rely on the kindness of the upper caste financially. As a result of a long history of slavery and humiliation, they also lack intellectual power (Ambedkar, 2003).

#### ***Long-term effect of caste-based occupation***

The caste system is not just a division of labor. It is also a division of laborers. Each different caste has a set of occupations associated with it. These roles were not only ascribed but also hereditary. This, in turn, implies that an individual's occupation is predetermined by the caste he/she was born, often without considering personal interest, skill, or merit (Ambedkar, 2003). Bêteille (1965) states that the caste system is a hierarchical system of designated groups that ensures the hereditary membership of individuals and specific occupations. Sinha (1967) also states that caste is a hierarchy of groups organized in the hereditary division of labor. Ghurye defines caste as a hierarchical social organization of groups where distinctions are made based on birth and occupation, where each such group has traditionally associated professional expertise. The traditional caste-based occupation of the Dalits based on patron-client relationships and artisanal occupations has been replaced by foreign labor migration and employment in metropolitan areas in the unorganized sector. The economic interdependence of high-caste and low-caste families through patron-client arrangements has broken down with a shift in occupational practices. The causes of occupational shifts are lower social prestige, discrimination, inability to compete in the global market, and the influence of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization (Acharya, 2023). Regarding the fact that Dalits are being left behind due to caste-based occupations, one respondent expressed his view as follows:

After the division of work based on caste, we men used to sew and play musical instruments. This work is no longer useful. We didn't have to go to school to sew clothes. Studying was not our job. They used to say that getting a job after studying was for the upper castes. That's why we didn't study. But now there is no value in sewing clothes. Ready-made clothes have displaced our occupation. That's why it's a problem to feed ourselves. Now the youth work as wage laborers. Some have gone to the cities. Once they learn to read and write, they drop out of school. Thus, they didn't study for further grades.

Historically, the caste-based division of labor has structured the roles and status of Dalit people. For example, Damai groups were assigned tasks. These tasks such as sewing and playing musical instruments were not needed for formal education. Since education was generally regarded as a privilege reserved for the higher castes, this notion served to further the idea that these people did not need it. A system where manual or craft-based labor was viewed as the only feasible source of income was thus maintained, impeding upward social mobility, and formal education was frequently ignored in these regions. According to the key informant, many Dalit students drop out of school when they reach adulthood. This means dropping out of school to work. After the school dropout, they dig roads, build houses, and work as a laborer. Those who drop out at a young age help their parents with household chores, allowing them to work outside the home. The above-mentioned statement highlights that most Dalit students have to drop out of school due to economic constraints and scarcity, which leads them to do physical labor like road construction or house building, thus facing many challenges later on in life.

One respondent says: Who among the Dalits has become a high-level government officer after studying? We used to make iron tools from a young age. We didn't know how to read or write. Nowadays, making iron tools is not very popular. How can we survive without working? We study after we survive. This statement reflects that there is no participation of Dalits in high-level government offices and not much work to be done after education. Dalit communities give less value to education. It also reflects that survival through manual labor takes precedence over education, and studying is mostly done after securing basic needs through labor.

## **Results and Discussion**

The study reveals a mixed trend in student enrollment and dropout rates in Molung Rural Municipality between 2020 and 2021. While enrollment increased from 741 to 787, dropout rates varied by grade, with the highest rate occurring between ECD and Grade One, highlighting a gender disparity in early childhood development. The dropout rate in Grade One is highest among boys, followed by girls in Grade Two at 20.75% and boys at 11.63%. Boys have a higher rate at 18.84% in Grade Four, with 35.29% dropping out compared to 2.94% in Grade Five. Grade Seven has a higher rate at 15.69%, with 17.86% boys and 13.04% girls. In Grade Ten, 20.37% of boys drop out, with 26.92% boys and 18.18% girls. The data shows a higher dropout rate for boys in Grade One and Grade Four, but less in later grades. Grade Five had no dropouts, suggesting a successful retention strategy. Boys have a higher dropout rate at this early stage.

The enrollment increases in Molung Rural Municipality from 2020 to 2021 are positive, but dropout rates are concerning. High dropout rates, particularly among boys, may be due to socioeconomic factors. Boys may drop out of school for work or social pressures, while girls may remain due to different cultural pressures like early marriage. The absence of dropouts in Grade Five suggests effective intervention strategies, such as community engagement and scholarships. Boys are dropping out at a higher rate in Grade Ten, indicating the growing difficulty of balancing education with adulthood pressures for work to survive.

Molung Rural Municipality's enrollment data shows a slight decrease from 787 in 2021 to 731 in 2022, with 56 students decreasing. Highest dropout rates were observed in Class 1, 11, 4,

2, 7, 8, and 10. The decrease in the total enrollment from 2021 to 2022 in Molung Rural Municipality may denote systemic issues at fault for causing student retention. High dropout rates across different grades, most in Class 1 and Class 11, point out the systemic challenges. Boys have a high dropout rate of 56.92% in Class 1, probably due to gender norms and expectations. Besides, girls have to balance more family or social priorities, making their dropout rate higher at this stage. In the case of Classes 4 and 7, the dropout rate among boys is higher, probably because most boys drop out of school for laborious jobs. Girls are seen dropping out more at Class 2 and Class 6, which could be related to changes in the curriculum or increased academic requirements. Students usually drop out in Class 10, especially because they perhaps compulsively had to join the workforce. Major factors contributing to school dropout among Dalit students include wage labor, lack of basic needs, low priority on education, and early marriage. Wage labor is often a result of economic pressures, while a lack of basic needs makes their families prioritize immediate survival over education. Dropout can also result from cultural or family-level factors, especially in the poorest communities. Early marriage is most particularly relevant in the case of Dalit girls. Dalit students are facing the same problems. Therefore, dropping out of school becomes a collective action. These behaviors continue to perpetuate the exclusion of Dalits in education. It becomes stronger. When the educational level is low, it becomes difficult to get a job. They are forced to do ordinary wage work and low-paid jobs. This excludes Dalits from the economic sector. With the continuation of this behavior, dropouts continue in the Dalit community. The value of education continues to be as low as it was in the previous generation. The value that education cannot be a means of livelihood for Dalit youth becomes strong. Dropping out is not just a personal decision for Dalit students, but a socially accepted practice. It can be argued that Dalit students drop out because they do not value education to avoid the problem of feeding their families. Although many literatures say that Dalits drop out of school due to caste discrimination, there is no caste discrimination compared to before. However, the actions taken to save themselves and their families cause them to drop out of school. Although this action is a personal adaptation strategy, it is gradually becoming socially accepted. Over time, dropout behavior becomes institutionalized and inequality continues.

According to Parsons, adaptive behavior or instrumental behavior refers to behavior done to achieve a goal. Dalit students drop out of school to avoid the problem of feeding the family. The patron-client relationship of the caste system and financial deprivation become the main reasons. The goal of earning a living through education becomes the main goal rather than the goal of earning money through education. The statement of one respondent that our ancestors did not study, why should we study indicates a value-oriented behavior. Dalit values and social expectations do not seem to give importance to education. If the importance and value of education is high, then they can study while earning money. The Dalit community itself seems to give less importance to education. The reason for this is the restrictions imposed on Dalits in caste-based professions and education.

## Conclusion

The study shows that economic, social, and cultural factors influence the educational outcomes of Dalit students. Other reasons include food insecurity, perceived low value of education, and early marriage. Food insecurity is something the student cannot do

because the family must select between school and survival needs. Lack of education also plays a significant role since this issue has been neglected or underestimated among Dalit families for a long time. It also highlights early marriage, which affects mostly female students according to cultural tradition and family pressures, compelling them to drop out of school in the early stages of education. High dropout rates in certain grades, particularly among boys, necessitate strategies for early grade retention, reducing dropouts, and addressing gender disparities in education to ensure sustainable enrollment increases. The Molung Rural Municipality has seen an increase in enrollment, but persistent dropout rates, particularly for boys, persist. To reduce these rates, targeted interventions like community awareness, financial support, and gender-specific barriers are needed.

The study reveals that economic hardships, cultural attitudes, and gender norms significantly impact the educational outcomes of Dalit students. Factors such as wage labor, lack of basic needs, low prioritization of education, and early marriage create a cycle of educational deprivation. Addressing these challenges requires economic support, community awareness programs, and measures to combat early marriage, especially for girls, to reduce dropout rates and enhance their prospects.

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