Left Behind in Adaptation: Dalit Voices in Nepal

On a sunny day in one of the Mid-Western municipalities of Nepal, the local people were set to gather for the formulation of the Local Adaptation Plan of Action (LAPA). As the participants started gathering, the room was filled with representatives from forest user groups, teaching and farming backgrounds. A few women were present but notably absent from the gathering were the members of Dalit community who lived along the riverbanks, as they had not been informed on time. Irrespective of their absence from the venue, the meeting proceeded and delved into flood control, irrigation improvement, embankment strengthening, road elevation, and other issues pertinent to only those present there. The meeting, which was supposed to be an inclusive platform, was driven by those already in power where the trials and tribulations of the structurally vulnerable remained unheard. But the question remained, can adaptation priorities for a Municipality be set by ignoring the systematically vulnerable subsect of the society? How would the adaptation priorities turn out to be? The chain of events in Bheriganga reveal a deeper reality about climate governance in Nepal, one where power, privilege, and caste continue to shape who participates, whose knowledge matters, and who is the beneficiary ultimately from these plannings.

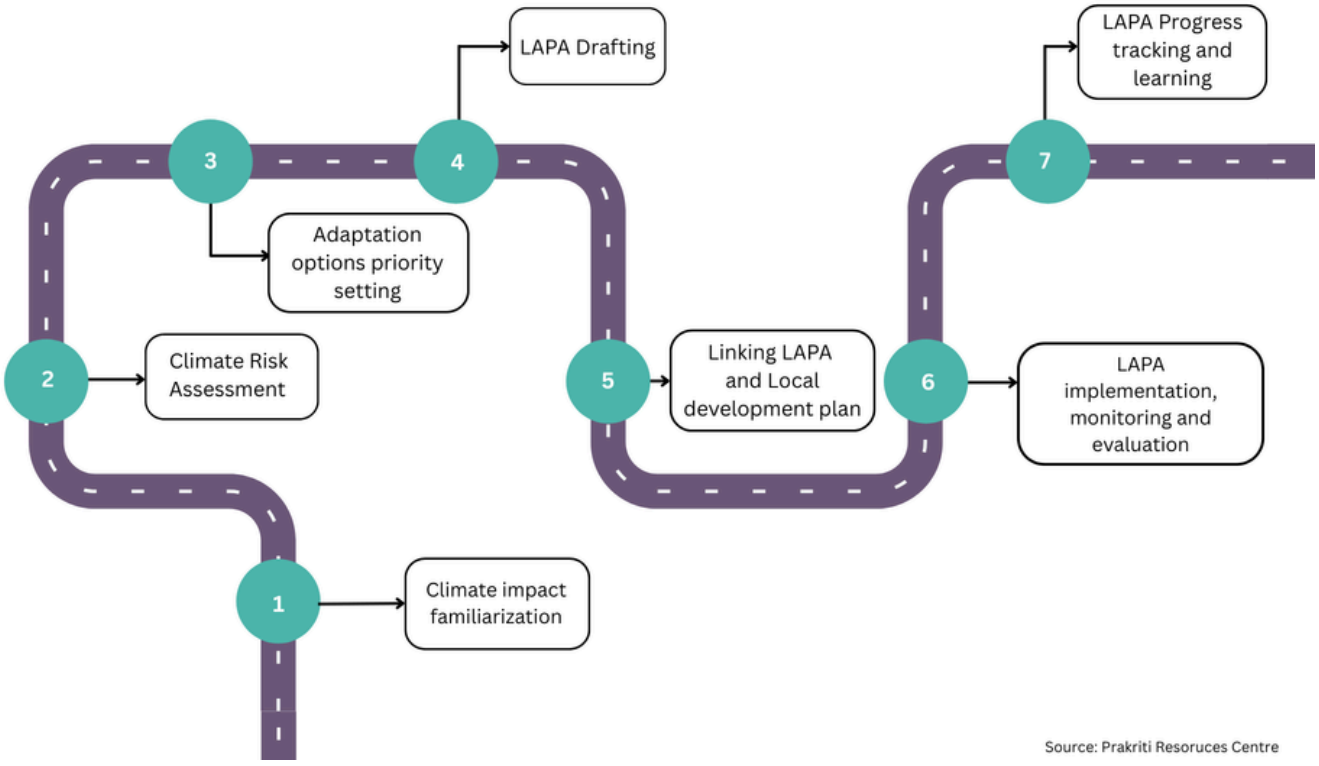

Figure 1: Steps involved in making LAPA

Local Adaptation Plan of Action (LAPA) was introduced in 2011 to enable and empower the local communities by identifying the climate risks, however, it was finally embraced and implemented at the municipal levels in 2015, after the formalization of the Nepalese federal government system (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Environment, 2011). This enabled people at the local level to work their way up towards achieving climate resilience through adaptation approaches by the channelization of climate finance directly to the local communities (Giri et al., 2024). In principle, it creates multiple entry points for vulnerable groups, including Dalit people, to engage in decision making, one of them being climate impact familiarization. However, the reality could not be further from it. As seen in Bheriganga, participation is limited, delayed or symbolic. Decision making spaces are hijacked by upper caste men, leading to adaptation priorities being set in the best interest of the elites rather than that of the vulnerable groups. This gap between practice and expectation reveals a deeper issue of inequalities entrenched within our system of governance.

To understand the significance of Dalit participation and dialogue in such discourses, it is imperative to unpack years of history of historical and structural inequalities they have been subject to. Despite legal protections against caste-based discrimination, Dalits in Nepal continue to experience systemic discrimination in education, land ownership, employment, and social mobility. According to the National Population and Health Census of 2021, Dalits make up 13.8% of Nepal's population, yet a disproportionately high percentage live in extreme poverty, particularly in terai, up to 44%. Only 10 % Dalits own land, significantly below the national average of 24%.

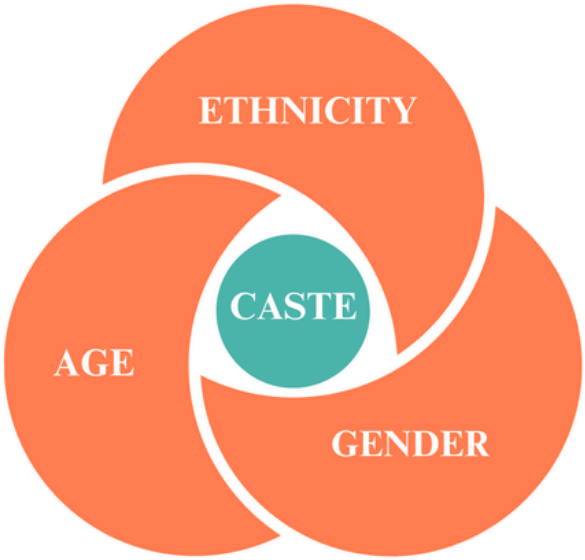

Figure 2: Wheel of intersectionality

Literacy disparities also remain equally alarming. While 67.4% of the Dalits are literate nationally, the literacy rate among Terai Dalit is only 51.9%. 31.6% of Terai Dalit women between 15 and 24 cannot read and write (Rauniyar, 2024) and more than one third of Dalit women, 34%, are subject to child marriage. These conditions directly shape the adaptive capacity of the entire Dalit community, the ability of individuals or communities to respond to climate risks (IPCC, 2001). Adaptive capacity is greatly determined by access to economic and technological resources, information, skills, infrastructure, institutions, and equity, which for many Dalits are severely restricted. Among these factors, equity is of high relevance as it underscores how fairly resources, opportunities, and decision-making power are distributed within the society. For Dalit communities, inequity means exclusion from the system of influence and governance, restricting access to adaptation resources, institutional support, economic opportunities, political representation, etc. Even if beneficial climate programs exist, they might not serve the marginalized communities in a beneficial manner. Hence it can be said that lower the equity, lower is the ability to adapt.

The experiences of Dalit communities are not monolithic. With a new layer of social identity, such as gender, age, culture, education level, disability, religion, economic status, etc. comes a new layer of vulnerability. When multiple identities represent a person, the challenges they experience become multiplied (Ahmed & Eklund, 2024; Blanchard, 2024). This holds true for Dalit women as well who experience climate vulnerability between the intersection of caste and patriarchy. As opposed to Dalit men, they are far behind in literacy rates, economic opportunities, access to technology and information, and political representation. Child marriage further limits continuing education and long-term economic mobility. Adaptive capacity, therefore, is not gender neutral.

Patriarchal norms within society and within marginalized communities themselves often favour men to have an easy access to resources and decision-making (Dev & Manalo, 2023).

Political exclusion further deepens the inequality because representation solely gives weightage to the interests of the represented ones in adaptation planning (Bishwakarma & Roongtawanreongsri, 2025). Alluding to the Understanding Climate Risk through an Intersectional Appraoch (iCRA) research, Dalit women frequently stand at the forefront of climate change risks while being some of the most vulnerable. For instance, a Terai Dalit woman from Mithila municipality revealed how wells, a primary source of potable water in many communities, dry up during extended droughts. Women become forced to walk long distances seeking for alternative water sources, the energy and time which would have otherwise been dedicated for domestic responsibilities such as cooking, child and elderly care in the family. Delays in completing these duties can expose women to domestic violence within their households.

At the same time, caste-based discrimination continues at communal water sources where Dalit women are made to wait until the upper caste individuals have collected their share of water first. This exemplifies how a climate change-impact interacts with caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms to shape everyday experience of vulnerability. While this may not represent every Dalit household in Mithila municipality, it tells us that climate change can add fuel to the fire of pre-existing social norms and injustices. The diagram below shows how structural inequities reduce adaptive capacity, leading to multiple climate vulnerability for Dalit communities in Nepal.

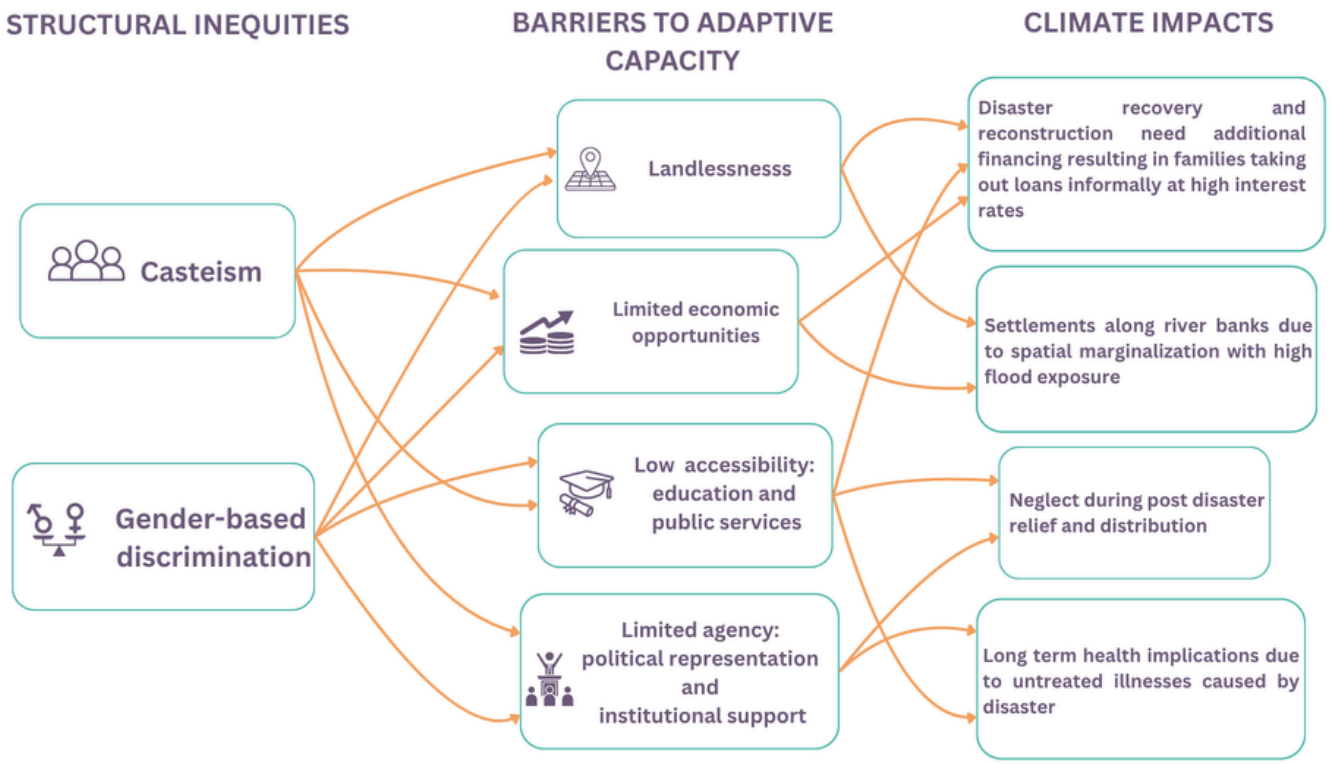

Figure 3: A flowchart showing how structural inequities, barrier to adaptive capacity, and climate impacts come into play

Dalit communities are also disproportionately exposed to climate-induced disasters due to geographical marginalization or social segregation, which prompts Dalit people to take shelters near riverbanks, flood-prone plains, or landslide-prone slopes, which could also be seen in the case of Mardhar Tole in Mithila Municipality. These locations increase exposure to floods while simultaneously limiting access to hospitals, schools, markets, and essential services. The vulnerability of Dalit communities does not end once disasters have occurred as reports suggest that Dalit people face discrimination during the relief and recovery process as well. During the Koshi flooding of 2008, Dalit people received inadequate relief, and in 2017 Terai floods, Dalit people from Loharpattai, Mahottari faced hurdles while accessing relief support (Sharma, 2021). This reflects broader power dynamics controlled often by the elites to deliberately influence resource distribution to favour socially dominant groups. Consequently, those who are most vulnerable to disasters are unfortunately the least supported even during recovery.

The government and relief groups tend to overlook caste discrimination and the vulnerable situation of Dalits. (Sharma, 2021).

An analysis of LAPAs from the municipalities of Ilam, Banepa, Bheriganga, Chaukune, Ramroshan, Bagchaur, and Triveni reveal that Dalit communities are recognised as vulnerable groups. However, a mere acknowledgment alone does not bring about meaningful inclusion. Only a few municipalities explicitly mention programs aimed at strengthening Dalit adaptive capacity. Even then, many interventions remain vague and generalized. For example, while Triveni's LAPA recognises that Dalits possess the weakest livelihood opportunities and proposes climate adaptation and Early Warning System (EWS) training, important questions remain unanswered.

How will these systems be made accessible to communities with low literacy rates? How will Dalit women, girls, or elders be specifically included? Will the elders be able to interpret the Early Warning Systems? Similarly, many LAPAs use broad and linear language that do not capture the interconnected realities of caste, gender, poverty, and climate vulnerability. The absence of intersectional thinking results in adaptation plans that overlook the nuanced challenges faced by the Dalit community. When a vulnerable marginalized community is ignored, the principle of leaving no one behind is not upheld. If the local adaptation plans are filled with shortcomings and loopholes, what does it speak of the National Adaption Programme of Actions (NAPAs). What does it say about Nepal's reputation of pledging some of the best climate actions? Have we really championed inclusive climate adaptation practices? That is some food for thought for policymakers, activists, climate change champions, and other stakeholders.

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Authors:

Prashiddha Ghimire is a Research Intern at PRC.
Heemani Mukhia is a Research Manager at PRC.
Shruti K.C. is a Research Officer at PRC.

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