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Caste, Tribe and Gender

Politics of Self and the Other

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For
My Beloved Teachers
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6

Caste-Based Exclusion of the 'Damai' Caste Group among the Nepali Community in Assam

Riju Devi

Every society is characterized by stratification, be it in a subtle or an extreme form. The study of inequalities in society has always been one of the important areas of sociology. The *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* defines stratification as being 'usually applied to studies of structured social inequality; that is, studies of any systematic inequalities between groups of people, which arise as the unintended consequence of social processes and relationships' (Scott and Marshall 2009: 735). The term *stratification* is used by sociologists to describe inequalities that exist within the human societies between the individuals and groups where they enjoy unequal rewards and status depending on which position they occupy within the system or society (Giddens, 2009). Caste, class, race, ethnicity and gender are some of the important categories of social hierarchy and differentiation.

This study is an attempt to understand the caste system of the Nepali community living in Assam with special reference to Sonitpur district. The term *caste* has been used to mean different things by different people in a variety of situations. Sometimes it implies a small and more or less localized group; at other times the same word is used to refer to a collection of such groups. Andre Beteille defines caste as

a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuits by traditions of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system, based on concepts of purity and pollution. (1996: 46)

The social scientists working in or on Indian societies have often assumed that the process of modernization initiated by the colonial administration would eventually break up the caste system and the ideologies revolving around it and give way to the class system. However, modernization has not been able to break the basic foundation of the caste system. The fact that some considerable changes have been witnessed in the caste system also cannot be denied, as it no longer is practiced as rigidly as ancient times (Jayaram, 1996). 'The caste system has been the most flexible of the primordial institutional arrangements in the world, and it has shown an extraordinary capacity to adapt itself to a variety of changing, and often apparently contradictory, socio-economic conditions' (Jayaram, 1996: 70). The acknowledgement of the changes in the caste system however doesn't deny the fact that such process is not uniform throughout the country. While in certain regions we see flexibility in day-to-day practices, in some other regions caste system is characterized by conservation and orthodoxy.

Since the present chapter intends to shed light on the caste system of the Nepali community in Assam, which is a migrant community, it is important to understand the history of their migration and settlement. The connection of Assam with Nepal is historically very old. Assamese historian Kanaklal Barua wrote that Assam had matrimonial alliances with Nepal since the early ages. But it was only during the colonial times that migration of the Nepalis to Assam took place with serious socio-political implications (Nath, 2003). An organized migration from Nepal hills to the frontiers of Assam was triggered by the British. A.C. Sinha provides two reasons for such major human movement. First, for some, life became difficult in Nepal due to certain factors such as the repressive regime during the mid-eighteenth century that meted unequal treatment to the subjects based on caste hierarchy. Also, the lack of arable land made life in the hills difficult that led them to move out of the country. Further, there were several factors that attracted the Nepalese people to the British ruled India where they realized their demand (Sinha, 2003).

Lopita Nath in her article Migration, Insecurity and Identity: The Nepali Dairywomen in India's Northeast states that

The Nepali dairy farmers are the later group of migrants who began to migrate in the last part of the 19th century. They followed the 'beaten paths' followed by the Gurkha soldiers recruited by the British to defend the Eastern Frontier and the skilled and unskilled labourers who came to work in plantations, coal mines and oil fields from the middle of the 19th century onwards. (2006: 130)

The number of such migrants kept on increasing contributing to the population of the Nepali community in the Northeast India. Chandan Kumar Sharma in his article 'The Immigration Issue in Assam and Conflicts Around It' states how the growing presence of the Nepali community in the Northeast and specially in Assam created the need among the leaders of the anti-foreigners movement to campaign against the Nepali 'foreigners'. This demand, however, did not gain such momentum. Even in the subsequent years no such movement against the Nepali community has been seen; rather both the Assamese and the Nepali communities have maintained an amiable relation (Sharma, 2012).

For the study, I would like to draw from multiple approaches. My work will be largely informed by Dumont's understanding of the concept of hierarchy where he focuses on the rigidity of caste position at each end of the hierarchical spectrum. For Dumont, the dominant principle of the Hindu caste system is hierarchy, which is informed by great religious significance, so are the principle keys of purity and impurity (Subedi, 2010). This understanding would be relevant in the area of study to understand the concept of purity and pollution in their day-to-day practice.

The Weberian perspective too is relevant for the study because he emphasizes on caste as a predominant phenomenon in the Indian society. He mentions that caste is more than of mere occupational specialization. Weber interprets caste as a special and extreme case of status groups, which is constituted by honour and prestige. Caste according to him is an ideal variety of closed status group. He further states that the decisive forces that lie in the core of caste system is to be found in ideology, that is, religion, and not in economy, or material conditions.

The Nepali Caste System

The Nepali ideological and cultural institutions are much influenced by the caste system. Similar to any other Hindu society, the social order of the Nepali community is exclusionary due to its classification into groups as distinct castes within the broad framework of the Hindu

system of the four *varnas* based on concepts of ritual purity and pollution (Subedi, 2010). According to M.N. Srinivas,

The layman is unaware of the complexities of Varna. To him it simply means the division of the Hindu Society into four orders, viz., Brahmana (Brahmin, traditionally priest and scholar), Kshatriya (ruler and soldier), Vaishya (merchant) and Shudra (peasant, labourer and servant). The first three castes are 'twice born' as the men from them are entitled to don the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of *upanayana*, while the Shudras are not. The Untouchables are outside the *varna* scheme. (Gupta, 1992: 28)

Each of the above *varnas* is constituted by many castes and sub-castes within them, which is true of the Nepali community too. Besides the general features as given by G.S. Ghurye in his book *Caste and Race in India* (1969), there are several small rules in the customs and religious practices specific to the Nepali community.

The knowledge of the caste system leads to the understanding of the contemporary Hindu society and provides us an insight to the society that practices it. In a general sense, the Nepali caste system pertains to all the above-mentioned features. However, the significant regional differences cannot be ignored. There are several sub-castes specific to different linguistic areas of the country. The Nepali being a migrant community in Assam has its own specificity in terms of the transformations in the institution of caste, owing to its interaction as well as adaption to the local setting of Assam. This chapter examines how the *Damai*, an occupational shudra caste, are marginalized within a multicaste settlement and excluded from the everyday affairs of village life.

Caste has undergone significant changes in different societies over a period of time. It is significant therefore to cite the works of scholars such as Srinivas who have discussed about these changes in the caste system. Srinivas, in order to explain such social changes has formulated the concepts of sanskritization and westernization. Srinivas defines sanskritization as "The process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in direction of a high and frequently 'twice-born caste' (Srinivas, 1966: 6). Generally, within the Nepali caste system the process of patronization of the high castes by the lower castes is quite prevalent. The distance in terms of contacts is strictly maintained and the concept of purity and pollution is imbibed, not just in the hierarchical structure but also in the day-to-day rituals. The acceptance of their exclusion by the lower-caste groups as fate and their submissive nature makes the

caste hierarchy still strong. Hence, even if the members of the lower-caste groups progress in other fields, their social status continues to be marked by their caste identity.

The Damai/Darjee Caste and Their Exclusion

Lamai/Darjee meaning 'tailor' is a sub-caste that falls under the shudra category of the Nepali caste system. This chapter will try to explore the discrimination of the *Damaís*, specially from the religious and socio-cultural points of view, and is based on the qualitative analysis of a small village. Hukai Gaon is situated in Sonitpur district in the north-central Assam near a town called Jamugurihat. This village is under the Pub-Borbhogia Panchayat in Na-Duar block which is populated mostly by the Nepali community.

Situated 4 km from Jamugurihat centre with a total population of 447 out of which 221 are male and 226 are female (Census, 2011). This village has 103 households and is populated by families which belong to the *Brahmin (Sharma)*, *Chetry*, *Newar*, *Kami* and *Damai/Darjee* caste groups. There is also a small population of Assamese community. Even though their caste name suggests that they are a tailoring caste, only two families in the village make a living by sewing clothes. Two families have members working in the defence services and Indian Railways. Few also work as part-time instrument players in a local band that plays in marriages. Most of them make their living as agricultural labourers.

Although the process of modernization India is going through, the people of higher caste and older generation do not easily want to give up power that they traditionally exercise over those below them. In Hukai Gaon, persistent traits of caste discrimination can be still witnessed in village life. Such discrimination is evident with respect to denial of entry to the lower caste groups by higher castes into their houses, temples, workplaces and other places. None of the households in the village which belong to the higher castes bearing surnames such as *Sharma* or *Chetry* provide access to the *Damai* people inside their homes. Any kind of business or conversation is to be done from the verandah or the yard. The high-caste people do not enter into kinship including inter-caste marriages. In the village, so far there is no instance of inter-caste marriage between the *Sharma/Chetry* and the *Damai* caste group.

Concept of pollution or contamination (*jutho*) among Hindus is vested with taboos when associated with food and drinks. Distance is also communicated through preferences and restrictions on

commensality held by members of particular caste and religious communities. A higher-caste person may have friends and workmates from lower-caste communities, whom he meets in the village and at the local market. But he neither visits their house nor takes meal with them nor invites them into his own house. The avoidance of close relationship with members of other communities is based on differences in food habits and restrictions following an ideology of what they can consume and what they have to avoid according to their caste and religious affiliations. The habits and taboos which are culturally determined are important in the sense that they keep different ethnic groups in different social strata. Generally, the higher the status of a caste, the more rigid it is in the matter of accepting food from others. Thus, Brahmans do not accept cooked food from non-Brahmins, although the latter accept it (Subedi, 2010). Also there are minute rules as to what sort of food or drink can be accepted by a person and from which caste. But there is great diversity in this matter (Ghurye, 1969). All food is divided into two types: *kachcha* and *pakka*, the former refers to any food in the cooking of which water has been used, and the latter to any food cooked in ghee. As a rule, 'a man will never eat *kachcha* food unless it is prepared by a fellow caste man, which in actual practice means a member of his own endogamous group'. To take *kachcha* meal with someone is to imply intimacy and approval (Dumont, 1980: 83-85).

The *Damaís* commonly face caste-based discrimination by high-caste people on various religious and socio-cultural occasions, especially during festivals, feasts, marriage processions and funerals. On different kind of feast (personal/public) in the village, they have to eat separately or at the end as the higher castes consider it polluting to eat together with the *Damai*. When asked about the same, many expressed that they face humiliation during wedding parties as they have to eat separately and at a distance from high-caste people. While many other cite *sanojaat*, *hami ta bhindai khamu paro ni* (being lower caste, we surely have to eat separately). Generally, in the Hindu caste system, untouchability is widely practiced around the concept of water pollution of water and use of public drinking water source. The *Damai* caste group does not fall under the untouchable category, however they belong to the *pani nachalne jaat* (water polluting caste). Upper-caste members do not drink water touched by them. Now however they have access to public drinking water (public well, hand pumps and water supply tap). Few families also allow them to collect water from their personal wells/hand pumps, while few still hesitate.

One reason of this is the fact that now almost every household belonging to the *Sharma* and *Chetry* households has their own source of drinking water and, hence, they do not have to share the public sources of drinking water with the *Damais*. They are also regarded as 'polluted' by the higher castes due to their food habits and lifestyle. The *Damai* caste group eats pork and makes their own rice beer which is not accepted by the higher castes.

Settlement structure of the village also manifests the caste-based discrimination practiced in the village on everyday basis. The *Damais* of the village state that the lower castes are generally not welcomed and around the settlements of the higher castes. Even if a *Damai* family settles within an area dominated by the higher castes, they feel isolated as they are excluded from almost every public and private function.

The discouragement in terms of formal education among the *Damais* also has its roots in their families. In spite of formal schooling and the basic amenities of education being free, the children of the *Damai* families are hardly motivated towards studies. Most of the parents are themselves uneducated and hence fail to understand the importance of education. When asked why their kids do not go to school, few replied by saying 'he/she doesn't listen and hence we have stopped saying anything'. In most of the families, girls are seen helping their mothers in the household works. Boys on being asked said, *Bangalore jaanchu, kamauna* (will go to Bangalore to earn money). There has been a trend of young boys from the village migrating to South Indian cities in search of jobs. A visit to the school revealed that the students were not asked to sit separately or even eat separately during the mid-day meal. However, discrimination by peers is also seen as the children were playing in different groups segregated by caste. Such discrimination even at the primary level shows how such exclusive and discriminatory ideas are imbibed into a child's mind by seeing their parents practice the same.

It is no surprise that the *Damais* face discrimination in community leadership as well. Representation in the community organizations is one of the best indicators of participation in the development process. In Hukai Gaon, the *Damais* claim that they are not given any role in the decision-making of the community organizations. Not only is their leadership not accepted, but not even a single member of the *Damai* caste group has ever been a part of any village committee or the school management committee as well. The higher castes find it insulting to take instructions from the lower castes and hence avoid involving them in any group. When an elderly Brahmin man was asked for the

reason of this, he responded by saying that it is the lower castes that are supposed to seek their advice and follow their instructions, not the other way round. Also, the representation of the *Damais* in the political sphere of the village is negligible. Although they have been active voters, none of their members have ever been nominated or elected in the local self-government elections. One reason is their small population as compared to the other higher castes in the village.

The Nepali community with its cultural, ethnic and religious diversity is majorly a Hindu and a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal society, where a women's life is strongly shaped by the male members of the family. However, the relative status of women varies from one ethnic group to another. Although the contribution of women in the family is significant, it goes relatively less noticed, probably due to the traditional 'expressive' role attributed to her, which again is taken for granted. Moreover, most of the work done by women is not regarded as economic activity, eventually establishing their work as less important in a wider sphere. Like their counterparts in other societies, Nepalese women are not a homogenous group. They are heterogeneous in nature. Thus, democratic practices in private sphere and forms and intensity of discrimination and inequality at private and public spheres vary enormously from one group of women to another. Women usually are victims at different levels. The upper-caste Brahmin and *Chetry* women are victim of gender discrimination alone, while the lower-caste women are double victim of gender discrimination as well as caste-based discrimination. Nepali women's status or positions and roles or functions are mostly based on prescription by patriarchy rooted in religion and culture. In most of the groups and community-based organizations such as credit groups and self-help groups, 'high-caste' women have more access to and control over resources. Lower-caste women are either excluded or even if they are included they are dominated by the 'high-caste' women in such groups (Bhattachan, et al., 2009). In Hukkai, the self-help groups formed by the women belonging to *Sharma* and *Chetry* categories do not include women from the *Damai* category. Nor are they included in any of the religious activities conducted by the women of the higher caste. *Damai* women are confined to performing domestic works and child bearing and caring. They have limited or no access to and control over resources such as land, house and cash. They experience violence including physical and psychological. In most of the *Damai* families in the village, wives are beaten by their husbands after they get drunk. To make their ends meet, many women work as agriculture labourers as

well as household maids. For them the labour is double as they also have to do all the household works. When a woman was asked what she did when her husband hit her, she replied, *galigarchu, tara hath uthaudina. Budo ho jastai bhaini* (I scold, but never raise a hand. After all he is the husband).

The *Damai* caste group in Nepal falls under the dalit category. Derogatory terms, such as *pani nachalne* (water polluting), *acchoot* (untouchables), *dom*, *pariganit* and *tallojat* (low caste), are used to refer to the lower-caste groups (Bhattachan, et al., 2009). However, in India as well as in Assam, the *Damais* do not fall under the official (SC) category. But they are referred to as *pani nachalne/tallojat jaat* (water polluting/low caste). In spite of the discriminations faced by them, they do not enjoy the benefits that are enjoyed by other dalit groups. The *Damais* fall under the (OBCs) category. There also has not been any kind of protest or any form of organized consciousness so far in order to claim the Schedule Caste status in Assam. However, a process of changing their surname to 'Das' is quite prevalent among the *Damais* of the village as a form of passive resistance. They do this as an attempt to evade humiliation as well as in the hope to avail the facilities as enjoyed by the SCs. The common surname among the *Damais* is *Damai/Darjee*. However, it is found that many students in the local schools have *Das* as their surname. *Das* – an inclusive surname – is used by them to evade humiliation. When asked why does he write the surname *Das*, a person named Bittu said that it sounds better and less humiliating than *Darjee*. Another young boy named Bikash who studies in a junior college added that most people who have *Das* as surname fall under the SC category and can avail facilities of reservation. He too hopes to access the same in the course of his higher studies.

Due to growing market economy in urban centres and intensified efforts by the dalit movement, caste-based untouchability is declining but has not yet been eliminated (Bhattachan et al., 2009). Even though the *Damais* are not regarded as untouchables, they continue to suffer from other exclusionary practices. The higher castes of the village do not provide them with any kind of services. The *Damais* even have their own 'priests' in order to conduct all kinds of religious functions as the Brahmins, the priestly caste, abstain from any kind of connection with them. With such discrimination and exclusion it is still humiliating for the members of the *Damai* caste group to exist in the society along with the other (upper) caste groups. Although rationality and universal perspectives have begun to replace and question age-old beliefs and

customs, those occupying the higher positions in the caste hierarchy continue to protect it. And with no intervention or initiative from the state to compensate the loss undergone by the lower castes, there is a chance that their status remains stagnant for a long time.

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7

In Search of the Myth and the Real 'Ishi'

The Last Man of Yahi Tribe

Abheeshta Nath

In the August of 1911, a man named 'Ishi' shot to fame in the American history neither due to his excellence in any discipline nor because of his notoriety. But he was identified by the Occidental world as the last man of the Red Indian *Yahi* tribe which was thought to be extinct sometime ago.

The *Yahi* tribe was a sub-group of the Yana tribe, which was a group of Native Americans, indigenous to Northern California in the central Sierra Nevada Mountains, on the western side of the range. The Yana comprises mainly four groups namely the Northern Yana, the Central Yana, the Southern Yana and the *Yahi*. They were hunter gatherers who lived in small egalitarian bands without centralized political authority. Their territory was approximately 40 miles by 60 miles and was rich in natural resources. Each group had relatively distinct boundaries, dialects and customs. The Yanas were around 3,000 in number, out of which 400 were *Yahis*. They were leading a rather peaceful, reclusive life until James. W. Marshall, the Anglo-American discovered gold in the American River in California on 24 January 1848, where the Yanas had their settlement. It set the stage for the notorious Californian Gold Rush - where tens of thousands of gold miners and ranchers flocked into the Yana territory. They plundered their resources, fought with the tribals for territory, killed them in multiple raids, enslaved and raped their women (rape