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Inter-Caste Hierarchy and Relations in a Multi-Caste Madhesi Village in Nepal

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Abstract

Vertical hierarchy, caste endogamy, caste-based occupation, and commensality are fundamental characteristics of caste society. All the basic features except the endogamous marriage system of the caste have been gradually changing in the Madhesi village. Because of penetration of civil politics and weakening of caste Panchayat (Jat Samaj), people transgressed traditional cultural codes and practices. Many of the middle caste/ ethnic groups ideally maintained their hierarchy but their interactions raised questions of caste/ethnic boundary. Among the Dalits and middle castes, each caste claimed superiority. New generation showed dual behaviors while dealing with issues of inter-caste commensality, hierarchy and occupation. I have collected data during different visits from 2006/07 to 2022. Based on ethnographic study in Golbazar Municipality, I explain transgression, changes, and contested hierarchy of the inter-caste settlement. Participant observation, key informant interview (KII), and informal conversation are tools of data collection. I have employed my PhD fieldwork data to compare continuity and change in inter-caste relations over time in a multi-caste settlement, Lalpur Golbazar.

Keywords

Caste, Hierarchy, Civil politics, Dalits, Relations, Transgress.

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1. Introduction

The Nepal Madhes is the most heterogeneous settlement in terms of caste/ethnic composition. Dahal classified central Madhesi caste/ethnic groups in broader five categories (Dahal, 2002). Plain castes, plain ethnic, Muslim and hill migrants are major categories of people. In terms of plain caste hierarchy, Maithili (Tarai) Brahmin, Rajput, Kayastha and Yadav are dominant hindu caste group. Kumhar, Baniya, Kushanhawa, Halwai, Malaha, Dhanuk, Kewat, Rajbhar, Kanu, Kurmi, Dhobi, Sudhi, and Teli are considered socio-culturally middle caste in Madhes. Tharu, Dhimal, and Danuwar from plain and Tamang, Magar, Newar and Rai from hill origin are known as ethnic communities. Among the Tarai Dalits, Khatwe, Musahar, Dushad, Chamar and Dom/Halkhor are still considered untouchables castes (Dahal, 2002). Other religious groups like Muslim, Sikh and merchant groups like Marwaria and Bengali are also lived in the Madhes. This study tries to understand caste/ethnic heterogeneity and hierarchy in one village of the Madhes.

Lalpur is a unique village where many Madhesi castes and hill caste ethnic peoples have been settled relatively long time. Some of caste/ethnic groups have been living before 1950 and others migrated to the village after the 1960s/70s (Regmi, 1972). In terms of the history of migration, Musahars, Tamang, Magar, Chamar and Chhetri claimed that their own community was the first settler of the territory. The Musahar claimed that their ancestors made arable land by cutting and clearing forests and soil (Jhoda Phadane). Tamang and Magar argued that their ancestors migrated from Kavrepala- nchok and Sindhuli to avoid caste rule and heavy taxation in hills during Rana regime. Their stories of migration from hill to Madhes are similar to the migration of hill ethnic from eastern Nepal during Rana regime (English, 1985). Yadav, Teli, Sudhi, Hajam, Koiri, Dom, Chamar, kalwar and other plain castes also claimed that their ancestors migrated before and after the Rana regime. Regmi noted that some landlords were encouraged and provided tax-free land to settle

people across the border (Regmi, 1972). Newar, Rai, some plain castes, Muslims and hill Dalits have a relatively short history in the village. The plain caste and Muslims were migrated in the village from the southern villages of Nepal. The flexibility and rigidity of caste and ethnic codes depend on the number of specific caste/ethnic households and their politico-economic status in the village. Each caste/ethnic groups have certain codes of interaction, commensality, cooperation and exchange in the village. Caste/ethnic codes were rigid till 1990s when Jat Samajs of each caste were dominant decision makers. Now, the administrative and judiciary power of the Jat Samaj of plain castes are almost defunct and remain on the level of ritual performance, caste unity, and identity. my field Observations showed that when they crossed the territorial boundary of the village, they transgressed caste/ethnic codes and rules of commensality.

There are broadly two communities: Hill caste/ethnic groups and plain castes. Within the plain caste, there are Plain middle castes (Hajam, Yadav, Ray, Barahi, Mahto, Teli, Sudi, Kalwar), and Plain Dalits, (Dusadh, Chamar, Musahar and Dom). Among the hill caste ethnic groups, Chhetri, (Bhandari, Bohara,), Magar, Newar, Rai, Tamang, and Dalits (Biswokarma). They (Both Dalits and Non-Dalits) have been living in a mixed settlement for many decades. Caste ethnic diversity is manifested in the domains of traditional occupations, commensal hierarchy, intra-caste divisions, and endogamous marital practices. Many of the listed plain castes, both dalits and Non-Dalits perceived superior ranking than other castes. Despite caste ethnic differences, they were united in village contexts like inter-caste Panchayati (public decision making assembly), marriage, rituals, festivals and territorial deity worshipping.

Hajam, Barhi, B.K. (Blacksmith), and Dom continued their traditional caste based occupational. They have been providing their caste specific services to village client circle on the basis of either piece work or annual grain paid that was locally called khan system. Rest of other Plain castes – Teli, Sudi, Yadav, Mahto, Ray, Paswan and Mushar had left caste based occupation and started caste-neutral occupations like hill castes and ethnic groups. The larger division of commensal hierarchy observed between non-Dalit and Dalit. However, non-Dalit castes have relinquished their previous hierarchical commensality in cooked food and water sharing among themselves. The Dalits maintained food commensality in the village. They treat Dom as the most defiling caste. Hill ethnic groups

maintained their intra-group divisions (vertical or horizontal) that played significant role to regulate endogamy. To maintain caste identity and hierarchy in normative rules, Plain castes have formed caste Panchayat (jat samaj). Jat Samaj has no legal status therefore it was not only difficult but also illegal to enforce traditional caste order in the village (Giri, 2018a). In the community they followed rules of own Jat Samaj but when they moved out of the village they did not follow commensality.

2. Objective of the Study

Gerald Berreman argued that inter-caste interaction among the plain castes is limited when caste hierarchical differences are great (Berreman, 1960). He compared plains and Pahari inter-caste interactions and claimed that mostly single caste group lived in a village and there were fewer opportunities for intensive inter-caste contacts (Berreman 1960 : 785). There are many caste-based pollution barriers and rigid commensality of child socialization. Consequently, most social interactions on the plains occurs within the caste and this frequently involves interactions across village lines. I am interested to explain intensive interaction among the various castes within the village. What are contexts of Dalits and Non-Dalits interactions in the village in Madhes? What are contexts of maintaining hierarchy and commensality in the village and out of village? How do they interpret changes of inter-caste interactions and commensality? What are the village contexts of their unity and social harmony? How do they maintain caste/ethnic boundaries in the multi-caste/ethnic village?

3. Methodology

I carried out fieldwork for my PhD dissertation in 2012 AD. I stayed in the village for a year. After the long term field study, I followed the village in 2015, 2018, 2020 and 2022. During these subsequent visits, I documented changes of caste system and inter-caste relation in the village. I employed ethnographic method to collect data. Observation and key informant interview (KII) are main tools of data collection. In my initial visit, Lalpur was typical agrarian village of the Madhes where multi-caste society maintained certain levels of caste based occupation and larger orientation of caste neutral livelihood. The plain caste people speak Maithili whereas hill caste/ethnic people speak Nepali as well as Maithili. The most of the public interactions were held on Maithili. Initially, I had linguistic

constraints and employed a boy from the village as language translator. He translated field notes and public interactions. Gradually, I developed linguistic competence on Maithili. I used data from different time. Translated data are again translated into English by myself. Out of coded data, I generated theme and thematic analysis pattern applied in this writing.

4. Findings

4.1 Differences and Divisions in the Village

The heterogeneity of the settlement was clearly observed at drinking water well and life-cycle ritual feasts where people gestured their caste ethnic commensality. Their open, masonry well was situated in the heart of the hamlet where Musahar, Magar, Chamar, Mallaha, Teli, Tamang, Chhetri, Yadav, and Mahato came to fetch water for cooking and household use. Public well was identified with the people who take water from them, not only because the water nourishes but also because women and men gather to bathe, wash clothes and scour their cooking pots by the well. A number of men were busy for cleaning and carrying water. Musahar, Tamang and Magar filled their vessels at the same time without caring about pollution by physical touch. Musahar, Tamang, and Magar youths could eat cooked food and tea by sitting together at everyday life but on the occasion of the feasts they could not sit together. Santosh Thapamagar said that Musahar boys used to carry drinking water for his family and there was no restriction for the Musahar to enter his house. I have observed that a boy (13 years old Musahar) working at the Tamang's home, where I often stayed, usually entered the kitchen and drank water but at the time of rice eating, he sat outside. There was no restriction to enter into the dining room. If plain castes observed the entrance of the Musahar in Magar, Tamang, and Rai's houses, plain castes hesitated to share water and food from hill ethnic groups. Moreover, hill ethnics were considered lower in hierarchy because they eat water buffalo. Rest of above mentioned community did not allow Musahar, Chamar, Dushadh, and Dom to touch water and entrance their homes. It did not mean that there was no commensality problem among the Musahars with the Magars and the Tamangs but it was true that the Magars and Tamangs were the most liberal on commensality. I have not observed Musahar and Chhetri, Musahar and other plain castes

together in the public well boundary. The food and water commensality of Musahar differed person to person and family to family of the Magar and Tamang. Rest of the communities strictly practiced commensality at least in public spheres with plain and hill Dalits. The Musahars also did not accept food and water from the rest of the Dalits. There is no uniform practice of caste commensality among particular castes and ethnic groups because some of them have shown their private-public duality. In comparison to plain middle castes, hill ethnic groups were observed far more liberal in commensality. Kapil Sada worked as wage labour at Tamang's farm. He entered his master's house and kitchen, but when there was family gathering in the Tamang house, a Mallaha woman was called for kitchen chores including cooking. When Musahar, Teli and Yadav met in Kathmandu, they shared food and water without hesitation. But, in the village, they could not think eating together. Jogindra Yadav said that all castes people ate food-water together when they were not observed by village people but in the village and public spheres (feast), both hill and plain Dalits were not allowed inter-dine with other castes.

The broader and clearly visible division was plain caste and hill caste ethnic groups. Despite their mother tongue in own community, and Nepali language, all hill origin people speak Maithili language at plain and hill people participated public spheres. their dress, physical make up and cultural and ritual practices are observable differences. Brahmin and Chettri of the hill and plain castes believed on the Hindu but their interpretation and practices are quite different. Hill castes claimed that they were the authentic Hindu whereas plain castes claimed that they maintained religious ideology and practice on the line of North India. Celebration of festivals like Dashain (Dasara at plain), Tihar, Teej, and Holi and their importance in the community found different. Somana Sada (55 years old, village leader) said that he felt easy to communicate with the plain origin people because they shared similar facial structure, dress, language and food. He again told that plain caste people were more orthodox and rigid in terms of hierarchy and commensality. The lines of integration were different when there were civil political gatherings. Somana argued that it was easy to communicate with Maithili speakers though he spoke many hill-people's languages. Their origin stories and migration history in the village divided their broader category. Hill origin and plain origin people are clearly noticed.

4.2 Village Caste Hierarchy

Differences and hierarchy among the plain origin and hill castes were realized when I observed everyday food, water, marital exchange and micro politics. The clearly visible categories of the people in the settings were plain and hill origin. The differences were realized through language, dress, physical make up and everyday politics at local institutions. Hill people said that plain castes were new settlers and they have recently entered in this village. On the other hand, plain castes commonly shared that hill immigrants encroached their antique civilization- "Madhes". Anti-hill origin movement in 2007, called Madhes Movement, was strong articulation of the deep-rooted thought of the plain castes. After the movement, many hill-origin caste/ethnic groups migrated from core Madhes (present Madhes province) to hill areas. There were collectively told multiple claims of place-people belongingness. In terms of geographical belongingness, Golbazar-Lalpur was cultural border in between hill and Plain-Madhes. Homi K Bhabha (1994) argues that a border is not that at which something stops but the border is that from which something begins its presence (Bhabha, 1994 : 4). He argued that borders were not binary like black and white rather borders were plural cultural settings. In this sense Bhabha termed border as 'thirdspace' (Bhabha 1990) like liminal space of Victor Turner in ritual performance (Turner, 1986). Lalpur is a multiethnic community because the plain castes and hill caste/ethnic groups articulate their legitimacy of the place as the first settler. Madhesi communities claimed that all plain land from Gangetic plain to Chure hill is in Madhesi cultural landscape. Das and Poole (2004) argued that people of margins were considered insufficiently socialized in the eye of the law and order of the state. Therefore, state attempts to manage the populations of the margins through both force and a pedagogy of conversation intended to transform subjects of the state (Das & Poole, 2004 : 9). So, there were undeclared antagonisms developed among the plain and hill castes before Madhes Movement in 2007. After the movement, the antagonism was materialized and many hill castes migrated either to safer parts of Plain or in Kathmandu.

Other broad visible categories among the people were articulated in the name of touchable and untouchable castes. In terms of everyday livelihood, most of the caste communities engaged in similar kinds of work. Amar Mahato argued that the underlying

make up of the categories of caste was rooted in Muluki Ain. He pointed to the old legal code 1854 (Höfer, 1979). The hierarchy and differences of castes were best observed at a feast organized by a Madhesi 'touchable' caste. The host felt social and psychological torture on breaching caste codes. There were micro hierarchies and differences among both the touchable and untouchable groups. Among the touchable, there were Brahmins, who traditionally did not allow inter-dining with Tamang, Magar, Rai and other touchable castes of plain. In plain caste ritual feast, the Brahmin and Chhetri sent junior members of their family as guest of Madhesi host. The junior members shared the kitchen and food with other touchable castes of hill and plain. There were separate kitchens for previously untouchable castes of plain and hill. Among them, plain dalit castes did not share food, water and physical proximity with rest of other untouchable castes. For instance, the entire Musahar guests should eat together in one or two turns. The food servers maintained physical distance when they were serving food to the guests. The Musahar guest did not eat with the Dushadh, Chamar, BK and Dom communities. An interesting observation was when Hutilal Sada invited Chamar, Dushad and Tali guests on the occasion of Bhandara . There was a fenced kitchen out of the house and two cooks were appointed from Thakur (plain Brahmin) community. All kitchen materials were provided by the host. Invited guests were served not only in different place but also by different servers. Hutilal Sada said that separate kitchen and service for each caste was main burden to invite inter caste guest among the Madhesi communities.

Jogindra Mahato said that youths under 20 from did not maintain traditional codes of commensality and hierarchy. So-called upper caste youth inter-dined with Dalits in public spheres. Old Brahmins were still found orthodox in terms of commensality. Among the touchable castes, though they shared food and water but they did not share marital relations among the touchable. Hareram Thakur said that marriage was the most sensitive issue of observing hierarchy among the plain castes. They precisely analyzed the genealogy of both sides before establishing matrimonial relations. If there would be mistake of hierarchy, their traditional Jat Samajs penalized materially as well as socially on the basis of degree of violation of traditional code (Giri, 2018a). The Samaj was powerful institution and it controlled system of purity of the particular caste. On the basis

of binding ties and grouping, I observed 5 broad groups of caste people at Lalpur.

Brahmin, Rajput, Takuri-Chhetri and Sanyasi (group-1) from hill to plain origin castes constituted ritual apex of the village. They were numerically in minority. Hill origin high castes specifically were found reluctant on everyday decision making in public spheres in Lalpur. Though they did not hold much land to name them landlord but their family genealogies were linked to political leadership and landlordism. Tamang, Rai, Newar and Magar (group-2) constituted politico economically relatively dominant group at Lalpur. They controlled adequate land, natural resources and social position in the village. Some of them involved agro forestry resource mobilization. They still have very good political economic holds in the society and local institutions.

Yadav, Mahato, Teli, Sudi and Plain middle castes (group-3) constituted emerging dominant category in the village. They controlled local market, land resources, everyday politics and government institutions. Yadav, Teli, Sudhi, Ray and Mahato were key decision makers in everyday life. The group was considered powerful competitor in the village. Their economy was profited by market, land and remittance. Koiri and Yadav have very good grip over agricultural production and local economy.

There were very few hill Dalit caste (Kami and Sharki) groups in the area. They did not accept food and water from plain Dalits. All Plain Dalits (Musahar, Chamar, Khatwe, Dom, Dusadha) constituted last rung of caste (group-4). There was wide gap not only between hill Dalits and Plain Dalits but also within Plain Dalits. Plain Dalits considered that Hill Dalits were inferior to them because they eat buffalo and dead ox meat. On the contrary, hill Dalits considered that Musahars, Khatwe, Doms and Chamars were inferior. The superiority and inferiority debates were observed when plain Dalit boy got married with hill Dalit girl. The Jat Samaj of the boy tried to penalize him. Because of his powerful political linkage, the Jat Samaj tolerated the inter-caste marital issue of the Musahar boy. Within plain Dalits, strong sense of caste discrimination is practiced. The Dushadha put themselves in superior position to Chamar, Musahars, Doms and rest of Dalits. The Musahars also considered that they were at the apex among the rest of the plain Dalits. Ramlal Sada (70 years Musahar male) shared a popular anecdote of the superiority of

plain Dalits. He said, "If a Chamar touches you, it pollutes your skin (outer layer of your body). If a Dushad touches you, it pollutes your bone (deep pollution). If a Dom touches you, It pollutes your whole family." The anecdote was differently articulated by the Dushad, Chamar and Dom. Among the plain Dalits, Musahar were considered closer with other hill and plain middle castes. Ramlal argued that a long history of Haruwa-Charuwa livelihood practices of the Musahar cultivated relative proximity of the Musahar with hill and plain castes.

When shared stories of caste purity, most of the plain castes were proud of their identity, regardless of textual traditions placing them on the 'purity-pollution' hierarchy (Dumont, 1972). 'Caste patriotism' (Gupta, 2005) like Gujars, Ahirs and Jats in India was implicitly practiced among Tamang, Magar, Rai, Mahato, Khabtwe, Musahar, Dom, Dushad, Bharman-Chhetri, Yadav, Teli-Sidhi, and rest of minorities castes in Lalpur. Ramlal and Jogindra argued that placing people on 'low, middle and high' caste would be misleading because none of the castes put themselves as inferior in any essential sense. The Musahars and Dom were poorer, they were less powerful, and less literate, but not always accept inferiority in society. The same is the case of Dushadha, Chamar, Khatwe, and other so-called middle castes in the village. Further, all the castes always valued themselves highly, they mostly hierarchized "other", howsoever idiosyncratic such formations may appear to be. Self-claimed Dalits (both hill and plain) denied their lowly status. However, they continued to believe that other castes were indeed polluting. Caste hierarchy and superiority claim by linking themselves to heavenly origin, bravery, and purity was common story of all caste in plain (Giri, 2018b).

On the basis of food and water commensality at Lalpur, elders of village had divided previous plain castes in two major touchable and untouchable groups, and five categories in general. In group-1, Plain Brahmins shared water and cooked food. They believed that there were intra and inter caste vertical hierarchy among hill and plain Brahmins. The group-2 mutually shared water and cooked food. They practiced ethnic endogamy except in the cases of elopement and love marriage. They believed that there was no hierarchy among themselves. There were many horizontal categories within Tamang, Rai and Magar but they placed culturally equal status. The second group was liberal in terms of commensality and marital practices. The

group-3 (Plain castes) shared water but not cooked food and marital relations. But the second group accepted cooked food, marital relations and water from the third group but not vice versa. There was still hierarchy and a strong sense of caste differentiation. There were various intra and inter caste hierarchies among Yadav, Teli, Sudhi, and Mahato . Last, the group-4, untouchable hill castes also practiced commensality among themselves. They accepted water and cooked food from each other but they refused to exchange marriage. Hill Dalits did not accept water and cooked food from plain Dalits and vice versa. Plain Dalits considered hill Dalits inferior and vice versa. The group of plain Dalit castes belonged neither horizontal nor vertical order because Musahars, Khatwe, Chamars and Dusadhs did not accept each others' food, water and marital relation. All of them claimed that they were superior to other castes. But the degree of flexibility and practice varied from person to person and household to household among the caste-ethnic groups. Outgoing youths and social workers were flexible regarding commensality and traditional caste codes. Senior people above 50 years and women were found rigid in terms of commensality and caste codes. The educated youths started campaigns to reduce caste-based commensality and civil politics. They argued that caste-based hierarchy and discrimination were obstacles to the perpetuation of social evils and crimes.

4.3 Inter-Caste Rituals Contexts

4.3.1 Marriage Feast

The marriage invitations to inter-caste guests was valied when the host family called either by giving pieces of betel nut or a paper card. The invitations are usually two types. if single person of a family is invited to join marriage occasion, it locally said hakaar and if all family members are invited, it is chulilebar. Kapuleshwar Thakur (48 years) said that higher frequency of invitation from other castes came on their girl's marriages rather than boys. According to him, the host was profitable to invite more households because every participant has compulsion to contribute money for girl marriage called dali. He said that invited guests consumed feast (bhoj) free of cost during boy's marriage.

Ramlal and Jogindra shared that inter-caste guests were invited during ritual feast of arranged marriages. Because of multi-caste society, guests were not only touchable caste ethnic groups, but also between Dalits and non-Dalits. At the occasion of feast (bhoj), guests respect each other's caste commensality. Jogindra Yadav invited

Dalits and non-Dalits guest during his daughter's marriage. The Dalit guests shared food cooked by non-Dalits. One of the non-Dalits served food in a separate row of plain and hill dalits guests. They did not touch each other during eating. When Non-Dalits were invited by Dalit host, host family provided uncooked food materials and touchable castes cooked by themselves. Usually, Brahmins cooked and shared feast among non-Dalits caste-ethnic guests of the host family. The cooking place for touchable caste ethnic groups was out of Dalit host's home. It was usually compound or uncontaminated place of non-Dalits field. Kishanalal B.K. had invited all his neighbour castes: Yadav, Ray, Sudi and Sada during his daughter's marriage. Being only three households of B.K (hill Dalit) in the village, it was difficult task to manage various caste/ethnic people from the village and the coming marriage procession of the groom. He asked to non-Dalit castes to prepare food for themselves and the members of the upcoming marriage. According to the request, Thakur prepared the food, while they distributed to the marriage guests. Meantime, four households of touchable caste of neighbourhood had refused to take food because they blamed some people of upcoming marriage of touching the water pot. To please these four neighbouring households, Kishanalal had again provided cooking materials for their caste cook. Krishnalal commented dual behaviours of the non-Dalits of the village. He claimed that they shared food and water with Dalits at Golbazar and out of village.

4.3.2 Death Feast

Death procession and ritual feat was another occasion of inter-caste gathering. The death procession locally said kathayari. Male were allowed as death procession to go cremation center. Women used to go half of the way. They waited when death procession returned. Although, no man of other caste even diyad (village) or kutumb (close relative) join in death procession without the invitation of dead's family. Such inter-caste participations, Dalits and non-Dalits death rituals were frequent occurred in the village. When family member died, the family must invite own kutumb or diyad. Family reputation and economic strength also determined the number of guests invited during death feast.

During my stay, I got an opportunity to join death procession of long cancer diseased Mahato man who hanged himself nearby own cowshed. His jat samaj people had unanimously declared it natural death. On the way to the cremation center, I observed, no other caste

participants of death procession touch corpse. Other caste people provided their company. At the cremation center they assisted together with diyad piling up wood sticks and sat around till the corpse had turned to ashes. All procession returned together but moved to their own houses. The bhoj to other castes (Teli, Sudi, Ray, Yadav and Magar) was organized at fourth day of cremation by the deceased person's family. The fourth day death ritual is called *chhorjhappi*. The specificity of this fourth day death feast is that other caste participants have not taken salt containing food items. The mourner household offered them rice pudding or beaten rice, curd and sugar, or sweets (*jeri*, *puri*) and curd. If any of procession participants left to invite on the fourth day, they were invited on the 12th day death feast called *Pitarpachha*. The commensality and hierarchy was like marriage ritual feast. Dalits and Non-Dalits were served food from acceptable caste servers.

Jagdish Ray shared that he invited his neighbors of various caste ethnic groups: Rai, Tamang, Magar, Yadav, Teli, Sudi, own diyad, *kutumb* and close relation households of Dusadh. At the time of the feast, he said that the food was not cooked for all participants of castes in one kitchen because the participants were large and it was hard to manage. So, plain castes cooked for themselves in one place, Magar and Tamang managed kitchen at Tamang's house compound. Similarly, Dalits were served by the plain castes by arranging them caste-wise grouping.

4.4 Fictive Kinship (Dosht) Without Hierarchy

Some men and women have made their inter-caste ritual friends called *dosht*. Male has a male and Female has a female *dosht*. They articulated a higher attachment with *dosht* than the ordinary circle of friends. The local people made a distinction between friend and *dosht* like "friend can be of the same caste but *dosht* always belong to a different caste." *Doshts* are considered as member of the same family. They frequently visit each other's family with gifts to maintain the relation intact. Further, at the occasion of their boy or girl's marriage on the part of each *dosht* has obligatory responsibility to pay his tribute (*bhar*) to the *dosht*. The *dosht* gifted cloths, cosmetics, husked rice and curd during ritual feast. In return, host also offered money or clothes. They were different castes but behaved like their own caste people. *Dosht* must invite each other on occasions of death, birth, marriage, household god worshipping and other 'pujas'. If one *dosht* belongs to Dalit caste, the Dalit respects

other caste's commensal rule. however, it does not mean he gets lesser respect in dosht family. It has been an established rule about ritual friends that man can only make man and woman to woman. Regarding commensality and avoiding rule, no dosht can touch the body of his dosht's wife and vice-versa.

4.5 Village Territorial Deity and Temple

Despite caste ethnic and commensality among the Dalits and non-Dalits, Dhamini puja (territorial deity worshipping) was the best way to manifest a sense of unified community. Each caste has to separately as well as collectively worship Dhamini before rice cultivation. The rationale behind this yearly celebration of Dhamini puja was to please the village God for providing sufficient rain for paddy cultivation and for the safety and betterment of village dwellers from danger, natural calamity, and diseases. However, senior people argued that villagers were not interested in maintaining villagers and human-god relations intact. Because of education and civil political orientation, many youths doubted on worshipping and rain-god. Seniors remembered that there was certain rainfall either on the same day or the second day of Dhamini puja. In Lalpur, there were three such Dhamini temples but only two were used by inter-caste groups for yearly worshipping. The first one was made by the Teli, Sudi, Magar, Dusadh, and Dom, collectively. They worshipped collectively. And the second was made by the Rai, Tamang, Yadav, Mahato, Ray, Newar, Bhandari, Bohra, Teli, Sudi, B.K., Musahar and Dusadh. In the first group, Dushad and Dom are Dalits and the rest are non-Dalits. In the second group, BK, Msashar and Dushad are Dalits. In both temple making group found mixed of Dalits and Non-Dalits castes/ethnic groups. They have been performing Dhamini puja in different temples but the process of worshipping and processes of sacrificing (goat and bird) were same.

A week before puja, some active people gathered at village tea shop and formed a five members inter-caste committee to accomplish worship with allocated responsibilities. They raised donation (money collected) to purchase he goat (uncastrated), she-goat (chaste), pigeons, cocks, hens, lawa (fried husked rice), and other indispensable offering items. At the same day, two boys below 10 years were chosen to collect worshipping items from the village households.

To sacrifice goats and birds, committee appointed any young male who carried out all sacrifices on the occasion. Nonetheless, all Gods and Goddesses of Dhamini temple preferred sacrificial blood.

Local deities named Dhamini Mata, Dihwar, Kohelni, Jungle Dhami, Jhakri, Bhimsen, Simebhume, Gaiya, Aghori preferred sacrificial blood of she-goat, he-goat, she-goat, pigeon, cock pigeon, swan egg, and he-goat respectively. After sacrifice, body of offered are distributed among all the participant caste/ethnic groups. Some of the offered birds and animals were roasted at the site and distributed among the participants.



Sacrificed goats are distributed among the inter-caste participants in Lalpur. Photo credit : Janak B Shahi

After the completion of the sacrifice, the members of organizing committee distributed heads of sacrificed goats and birds. They were allocated according to existing norm, in which one head of goat to committee, one head of the goat to the main Pujari, one head of the goat to slaughter man and other functionaries of the worshipping. After distribution of heads, the participant youths carried sacrificed bodies in the village. Then, they shared parts of goat meat according to the equal number of participant households. However, sharing part of meats must be balanced by the sight of mixing flesh quality. Even Dalit castes contributed equal money and participated like non-Dalits. Non-Dalit castes equally contributed money for buying pig though they did not eat pork. In 2006, they made an agreement to replace pig by goat because goat meat was not a taboo for all caste people.

5. Discussion : Caste Council and Civil Politics

Language, origin story, religion, region, kinship, culture and caste/ethnic belongingness are primary units of grouping in Lalpur village. Own kins and caste/ethnic people were considered the primary circle of the invited list. Caste councils of the plain people were active agency to maintain traditional caste codes, particularly

marriage and commensality. If any member of the caste council violated the codes, the authority of the council penalized and organized feast to feed own caste people. After the revival of democracy and a series of civil society movements after 1990s and 2000s, caste councils became weak, and civil politics emerged as dominant agency of decision-making and law prosecution (Giri, 2018a). Therefore, caste-based hierarchy and commensality found in village as private issue. They did not want to share caste discrimination and commensality issues with outsiders. They said that certain traditional values of the caste should be maintained otherwise other villagers will deny to exchange marriage with them.

I observed that Dushadh, Chamar, Mallaha, Teli, Yadav, Sudhi, Mahato and Musahar shared language and similar styles of dress but they did not share food, water and other political economic activities. Their migration stories, language, culture, blood ties, kinship network political belongingness and economic activities conversed with hill origin people. When observed village grouping and alliances among the hill origin and plain castes, primordial sentiments found organizing glue. Clifford Geertz (1973) argued that primordial sentiments like culture, race, language, kinship ties, and origin stories have strong capacity of making alliance though civil politics officially practiced in south Asian societies. Similarly, Berriman (1960) argued that Pahari and hill castes have different rules of hierarchy and commensality. Their language, origin stories and culture strengthened territorial grouping rather than same caste of Pahari and plain (Gaize, 1975). Gaize, Berriman and Geertz concluded that primordial sentiments have strong cultural glue rather than civil political ideology (Berriman, 1960; Geertz, 1973). The duality of caste behavior manifested because of the penetration of civil politics. The old civil code called Muluki Ain, 1854 enforced caste-based hierarchy, marital relations, and commensality among different caste/ethnic groups in Nepal (Hofer, 1979). Violation of the caste code was considered a serious crime. The caste code was legally implemented until the amendment of the code in new name called the New Civil Code in 1963. Though the new civil code eliminated caste hierarchy and untouchability, people practiced caste hierarchy on the patronage of the kingship in Nepal (Burghat, 1984).

I have discussed some social and cultural domains of inter-caste interactions. Though, there was no Jajmani system (Dumont, 1972) as

such, people exhibited rigid as well as flexible caste hierarchy in Madhes. In the village, both civil political rights and primordial sentiments based caste hierarchy and commensality prevailed. My relatively long observations from 2006 to 2022 indicate decreasing authority of hill high caste and plain caste codes and increasing governance of Madhesi people and civil politics. Among the Madhesi castes, issues of commensality and inter-caste marriage were critical. Caste based code transgressors left the village because their community did not entertain them. After 2006, caste-based hierarchy and commensality gradually changed in the village because many Dalits and marginalized communities organized civil-political movements against caste and socio-economic domination. Large number of NGOs set their programs to eliminate caste based discrimination and untouchability (Shah, 2008). Civil society and political parties prioritized unity and harmonious relations among different caste/ethnic and regional groups in Nepal (Giri, 2018b). The Madhes movements, political party movements, school education, and civil society mobilization activated civil, political rights and identity of the marginalized communities. Caste/ethnic, linguistic and regional identity remained mostly talked and discussed issues in the village. People formed and transformed their caste/ethnic, linguistic, and regional boundary (Barth, 1969) while social relations were intensive. F. Barth (1969) argued that ethnic boundaries were maintained not in isolation from other groups but rather flow of people and frequent inter-ethnic social interactions. Plain and hill caste/ethnic groups exhibited both unity and differentiation in different social contexts.

6. Conclusion

The article explains the continuity and changes on caste hierarchy and commensality over the times. Hill origin and plain caste articulated their differentiation in terms of mother tongue language and original inhabitant of the village. The discourse of the first settler manifested during the movements. Hill origin peoples were condemned during Madhes Movement in 2007. Plain castes claimed that they were the first settler and legitimate owner of the land. Some of the hill people migrated and settled before arrival of the plain people in foothill of Chure hills. Language and culture are other instance of separation of plain and hill peoples. Among the plain castes, hierarchy and commensality manifested during rituals and feasts. They did not still shared kitchen and exchange of marriage.

Among the non-Dalits, hierarchy and commensality observed during marriage and family rituals. Many of them claimed their superiority. Dalits maintained their caste commensality and endogamous marriage practices. The Musahar claimed that they were superior than the rest of other Dalits. They do not share food and marriage with other Dalits. Similarly, Dushad, Chamar, and BK claimed their own superiority. They also segregate other Dalits in food and marriage.

Despite everyday interactions among the different caste people, certain village functions and rituals revealed unity and differentiation of caste people in the village. Inter-caste guest are invited during marriage and death rituals but their proximity and commensality are maintained. Invitations and everyday exchange of food, labor, and cash maintained inter-caste harmony. Village rituals, market and periodic functions provided contexts of unity and differentiation based on caste, language, and region.

The traditional legacy of caste council remained defunct but people maintained certain caste specific codes of commensality, hierarchy and sexuality. Mostly dual nature on commensality and sexuality was observed. They denied to share food with dalits and inter-caste marriage in the village. They did not mind eating with Dalits out of the village and illicit sexual relations with other castes. Civil politics and caste codes are not only contradictory but also illegal. Caste-based discrimination and practice of untouchability are forbidden by the Constitution 2015. The tensions between civil and political rights and primordial sentiments compelled people to redefine inter-caste relations in the village. Therefore, a rapid decrease of caste codes and increase of caste/ethnic identity observed among the villagers. Civil and political governance could not control the caste and cultural life of the people. Civil politics and caste codes have partial governance and authority in the village. A recent dilemma among the villagers was the continuity of caste codes and the application of democratic and recent human rights principles.

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