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Exploring the Voice of Voiceless Groups in Lamsal's Epic *Agni [Fire]*

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Abstract

This article studies identity crisis and suppressed voice of Dalit community depicted in Nawaraj Lamsal's epic *Agni*. The epic tries to raise unheard voice of voiceless groups like Thule Kami and his community. The study introduces the sacrifices of Dalit community in nation building through the creation of various tools for farmers and weapons for warriors. Through his work, he questions the government and ruling class people about sanctioning of human rights to dalits, indigenous people and women. Lamsal's epic narrates the story of Thule and Thule's community in order to make people know about the sacrifice of such othered people in leading society ahead. Moreover, caste system has left a pervasive mark on nearly every aspect of Nepali society. In caste based society, untouchable communities are born into a lifetime of marginalization, exclusion, and human rights violation. For the analysis of the characters and voiceless voice, subaltern studies and idea of Gayatri Spivak regarding unheard voice of marginalized people have been used. Spivak argues that subaltern can not represent themselves, they need to be represented. The intellectuals, historians or politicians often give more focus to their individual interest rather than the stories of subaltern groups.

Keywords: voiceless group, subaltern, identity, history, exclusive

Voice of Thule Kami

Nawaraj Lamsal's epic *Agni [Fire]* published in 2021 explores the unheard voices of Dalit community through the true story of Thule Kami and his relationship with the King of Makwanpur, Hem Karna Shen. According to story of Thule Kami and Hem Karna Shen, Thule Kami wanted to make clear that he had not stolen iron but nobody allowed him to speak. Thus, he was identified as thief. The king and king's helpers underestimate Thule Kami. Although he is innocent, he is accused of stealing iron while making Jethi sword. Gayatri Spivak claims that subaltern people are not heard (Can Subaltern Speak? 28). She further says that subaltern groups lack representation so they need to be represented. The activist who raise voice in favor of their interest but

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they rarely raise voice in support of subaltern people. As a result, the voice of subaltern remains at the bottom of social hierarchy. Thule Kami and other people from his community are subaltern because they have no access to political power, no space in history and they have to accept the stereotype identity given by the ruling class people. The historian, David Ludden said that the term “Subaltern” used to denote “low rank of army”, “vessel” and “peasant” in the past (4). Similarly, Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci defines subaltern people are those who have no access to power of state. The subaltern classes remain under the will of “the dominant class” and take part in the hegemony created and controlled by the very class (qtd. in Ghafoor and Farooq 30). Subaltern groups are such people who have no access to political power and subject to hegemony of the ruling class people. In this article, the researcher studies how Dalit become subject of ruler’s hegemony.

People from low caste community always remain in low social strata in Caste based Nepali society. People are treated on the basis of their caste, gender, ethnic background, linguistic background and economic status. Moreover, the researcher, Man Kumar Rai writes that “the Hindu caste system was legalized in the Kathmandu valley in 15th century and throughout Nepal by the Civil Code (Country Code of the year 1854) (81). According to Civil Code 1854, the Dalit community occupied the lowest social status (Sob 57). The people from Dalit community were treated as human being according to Civil Code of 1854.

Even in the world of Information and Communication Technology, people from Dalit community have to hide their real identity in order to get rent in major cities of Nepal. Mitra Pariyar argues that the idea of the country as a secular democratic republic sounds like a misnomer for most of us, as we still face exclusion, humiliation and violence reminiscent of the Rana autocracy (par. i). He does not see changes in the life of Dalit community even after such drastic changes in Nepali politics. Similarly, Tika Ram Poudel reported an event that Preeti Gaire, a junior technical assistant was not allowed to go enter even in the shed where the goats were because of Preeti’s caste (par. i). The example of Preeti Gaire is enough to know the situation of Thule Kami of that period.

The epic tries to show creations of Dalit community and role of creations in nation building. However, the state or ruling class people always underestimate their important role in Nepali society. There are six workers along with Thule Kami who had to spend nine months in order to make two Jethi swords. The nameless workers from Dalit community reflects the real painful situation of such group of people who are often identified by stereotype identity. They lack real name but they are identified by the names given by high caste people. National Assembly Member Bhuvan Bahadur

Sunar drew the attention of the Ministry of Home Affairs to correct the derogatory names of the members of the Dalit community in their citizenship such as Kukur (dog) Kami, Kukurni (bitch) Kami and Fyauro (fox) Badi (Himalayan Times paras. i-iii). Derogatory names given to Dalit community clearly depicts mentality of the officer who are obviously high caste community.

It is necessary to study how the suppressed voices of Dalit community have been explored in the epic. The art, creation and labour are praised by the high caste but the same creators are not treated as human being. The text shows inhuman behavior of upper caste people. The Dalit community are unable to raise voice against such inhuman behaviors. So, the article attempts to answer the following questions:

- What are the effects of caste discrimination in the life of Thule Kami and his next generation?
- Why does Thule Kami remain silent?
- How do the ruling class people make Dalit community as subject to hegemony?

Rulers' Perspective

Caste based society helps to develop superior complex in a person who is from high caste community and inferior complex who is from low caste community. Superior and inferior complex of people play role to break down harmony in the society. Hem Karna Shen represents not only ruler but also people who are from high caste family whereas Thule Kami represents entire Dalit community who are at the bottom of social hierarchy. The attitude of high caste people is represented through the psyche of ruler, Hem Karna Shen. On the other hand, fear of Dalit community and subaltern groups are represented by the fear of Thule Kami. Lamsal narrates the history of Hem Karna Shen who was the king of Makwanpur since 1790 B.S. and remained king till 1816 B.S. King Shen ordered Thule Kami to make Jethi sword. Thule Kami had learned skill of making sword from his grandfather. Seventy-five years old, Thule Kami made two sizable swords for the king. The two swords were made up of one hundred and sixty k.g. raw iron. Six workers had to spend nine months to make two powerful swords. The Jethi sword was of such high quality that it would not rust and had the ability to cut off the iron.

Thule Kami gave two beautiful and powerful swords thinking King Shen would be happy with him but king became angry when he saw the size of the swords. He thought Thule Kami might have cheated him. The size of the sword was not convincing size for him because he had asked him to make swords of one hundred and sixty k.g. iron. He expressed his anger by throwing away the swords. There were thirteen elephants in the

hut when the fire caught it. One man cut the chain of iron with the sword and saved the life of the elephants. No effect appeared in the sword then King came to know the reality behind the swords. King Shen was not ready to understand skill and hard of making sword before because of his prejudice. He thought Thule Kami might have stolen the iron. Thule Kami wanted to make them clear about Jethi sword but nobody was ready to listen him. The biased perspectives of rulers forcefully introduced Thule Kami as thief. The king and his followers thought that he must have stolen the iron. “Thule dui kadam aaghi sare/ bolna khoje kehi/ bolnu aaghi nai/ sabhashadharule roke, ishara garera/ aakhir jaha pani rokin bhaneko ta/ Thuleharukai aawaj na ho!” (“Thule moved two steps ahead/ tries to say something/ before speaking/ Member of Parliament stopped him through signals/ the voice of subaltern/ and Thule kami always would be stopped!” my trans.; Lamsal 108). The suppressed voice of Thule Kami represents suppressed voice of entire subaltern groups. The rulers have no patience to listen them. So, subaltern people are unheard and often ignored. The King and his helpers might have seen what he was going to say but they thought it would be meaningless to listen him.

Hem Karna Shen was so cruel to seventy-five years old man, Thule Kami because he did not try to understand the effort of Thule Kami. Thule Kami sacrificed his time, hunger, desire in order to fulfil the king’s desire for powerful sword. Instead of giving thanks to Thule Kami, he insulted him blaming as a thief. “Aae Thule/ kaha rakhish baki falam?/ kashlai diyesh/ ke garish? Bhan!” ‘Hi Thule/ where is other iron?/ whom did you give?/ What did you do? Tell!’ (my trans.; Lamsal 103). Thule Kami worked hard for nine months in order to make sword without salary. He faced financial crisis in his family. However, he could not make king happy. King asked him series of questions which were associated with his morality and dignity. Thule wanted to clarify but no one had time to listen him. “Saattako na aakhaa hunchha, naa kaan.” (“Authority has neither ear nor eyes”; my trans.; Lamsal 106). The state gives subaltern people no priority. Thus, they are unheard.

Lamsal points out that ruling class people need to change their perspective in order to uplift the status of marginalized people. There is no possibility of prosperity in the society unless people are treated equally. Feeling of injustice causes conflict which leads society to destruction. Only movement of Dalit community can’t be sufficient for positive change in the society, the behavior and perspective of people from the so-called high castes should be changed. They need to realize humanitarian aspect of marginalized people. Academic institutions can play key role in transforming society. Either highly educated or illiterate, they learn some lessons in schools or colleges and they apply them in the society. Lamsal demonstrates very negative practices of

casteism in the school. Students from Dalit community face different kinds of discriminations in schools and temples. “Sikchha bhanda badi tiraskar chha/ aapaman piyera farkanchhan school gayekaharu pani” ‘Hatred is more than education/ come back home being insulted instead of gaining knowledge’ (my trans.; Lamsal 7). Academic institutions seem to be unable to exert influence in societal transformation. The syllabus of schools and universities should deal with grounded problems of the society so that the students can play some level of role in changing society.

Subaltern studies is a way of raising questions against bad histories. Bad histories are exclusive which include the history of only winners. The objective of subaltern study is to study the history of the nations or histories of such groups who were previously excluded (Chakrabarty 15). The epic Agni tries to rewrite history of ignored group in the past. “Itihash bhaneko ta/ jitneharuko darbari abhilekh ho!/ na aaran bolchha yaha, na aawjar/ na khalati bolchha, nay yo purano bhitto/ bharbhar aago/ bharbharwachha matrai, aawaj bhujhinna!” ‘History in fact/ document and record of the winner! / neither aaran speaks, nor weapons/ nor khalati speaks, nor old wall/ nor fire/ just murmuring, voice is not clear’ (my trans.; Lamsal 26). The voice of marginalized groups is unheard because the rulers do not find their individual interest imbedded in the voice of marginalized people.

Unheard Voice of Dalit Community

The low economic status, lack of education and limited access to decision making power render Dalit community under in Nepali society structured around caste. The dalits are deprived of their fundamental rights of education, possession of assets and rights to equality (Bala 40). Thule Kami did not see any school in his childhood days. He had no idea of justice, injustice, discrimination, equality or human rights. He was not aware how he was being treated by ruler particularly by king, Shen. He feared facing death penalty if he spoke against the ruler. So, he chose to remain silent even when accused of stealing iron.

They appreciate creations of Dalit people but mistreat the creators, viewing Dalit as untouchable. They worship the statue of god in the temple but the same creators are not allowed to enter into the temple. The upper caste people have been using different tools made by Dalit in their farming activities. When they come back home from Aaran, they clean themselves by applying cow’s urine over their body. “Aaranbaata farkepachhi gaiko gahut/ ra sunpaanile chharkera chokkhine chetanale kasari lekhchha:/ aaranko itihash, manchheko maryada?/ kasari lekhchha: sipko aartha ra samarthyako sima?/ tapaiko dristikonemai khot chha, mahodaya!” (“Coming back from Aaran/ high caste people throw the urine of cow and water of gold to purify them/ how can they write history of Dalit having such mentality? How can they write meaning of art and boundary of ability?/ there is problem in your perspective! Sir”; my trans.; Lamsal 6).

Conservative belief of upper caste never allows to uplift the status of Dalit community. They always remain at the bottom of hierarchy system. The old mind set of ruling class people creates the vast gap between upper caste and Dalit people. The subaltern people continue to be neglected by the state due to rulers' double standard behavior. "Aetai manchhe duaita jibro liyera bachchha:/prayog garna ra prachar garna!" 'A man lives with two tongues: to use and to advertise!' (my trans.; Lamsal 6). The majority so called high caste people and educate people are not as they appear. Double standard of high caste people never plays constructive role to lead society in right direction. Racial discrimination ruins harmony of the society. Society can not be prosperous if human beings are not treated as human being.

A few people from upper caste raise their voice in support of marginalized groups, but the majority society creates discourse accusing them of violating the social harmony. Rather than addressing the societal issues, they often blame reformists as discriminatory. Lamsal argues that society rejects them who always stand in favor of social transformation. Change in society seems to be really tough in real ground. The role of building nation played by Dalit community was ignored by the state for long time. "Samaaj badalchhu bhanne dheraiko/ baash utheko chha bastibata!/ pariwar chhuteko chha pariwarbata! Ra affai chhuteko chha aafaibata aklaiaklai!/ saknuhunchha, bicharko ladaima abichalit ubhina?" 'The majority people who wanted to change the society/ became homeless in the village!/ member of the family separated from each other/ became isolate totally!/ can you continue your ideology without being upset?' (my trans.; Lamsal 5). The lines of the epic portray the condition of persons who dare to speak against social injustice. The voice for justice and equality would be snatched by the state or ruling group of people. The voice in favor of Dalit community can not be as effective as it should have been.

Dalit as subaltern can not represent themselves; they must be represented (Spivak, *Can Subaltern Speak?* 29). "kina boldainan itihashkarharu, shashakharu/ kina boldainan ghyataharu, aadhyataharu/ kina boldainan, bhuaيمانचहेका कथामा राजनीति गर्नेहारु". ("Why don't historians and rulers speak?/ why don't scholars and experts speak?/ why don't the politicians speak who do politics in the name of subaltern?"; my trans.; Lamsal 223). The politicians, intellectuals and historians often prioritize their personal interests ignoring the real issues faced by marginalized or voiceless people. Thus, real voice of subaltern group is unheard. Similarly, subaltern has no history, so can not speak (Spivak, *Can Subaltern Speak?* 32). "Gaadimai gaadiyeko chha gaaadiko itihash/ shramikko itihash/ ra shrijana ko itihash". ("In the fort/ the fort's history has been buried in the same fort/ labours' history/ and history of creation"; my trans.; Lamsal 181). The history of indigenous, workers, and Dalit have been destroyed by the

historians ignoring their sacrifice for nation building. Like new historicist, Stephen Greenblatt, Subaltern studies tries to include the histories or histories of people who were excluded in the past (Abraham and Harpham 247). The aim of subaltern studies is to explore the suppressed voice of voiceless groups.

The rulers won different wars using the weapons made by the Dalit, particularly Kami. They sacrificed their life for the sake of nation but state ignored the sacrifice of such Dalit community in the name of making country sacred. The poet, Lamsal asks questions to the rulers and historians who neglected sacrifice of their life for the sake of nation.

“Prithivinarayan Shahko taarbaar kaaslee banaayo?

Shivako damaru ra tirshule kaasle banaayo?

Krishnako sudharshan kaasle banaayo?

Kaasle banaayo Arjunko Gaadhiv?

Kaasle banaayo bhagwanko darbaar?”

‘Who made the sword for Prithivinarayan Shah?

Who made Shiva’s damaru and tirshule?

Who made Krishna’s sudharshan?

Who made Arjuna’s Gaandhiv?

Who made god’s palace?

Who made gods and goddess’ statues?’ (my trans.; Lamsal 29).

The answers are clear. However, the society ignores them and makes false discourse against Dalit community. Subalternity is a position without identity (Spivak, *Scattered Speculations* 476). The role of nation building and unifying Nepal by dalit community has been ignored by exclusive history of Nepal. Prithivinarayan could defeat his enemies by using the weapons by Kami but later on, no historian talked about role of dalit community in nation building.

Role of Aaran in Nation Building

The Aaran stands for identity of Dalit community particularly people from Kami caste. Actually, Aaran indicates honesty, hard work and dedication of Dalit community.

“Yaahaa saadhana chha, yaahaa sangharsa chha/ yaahaa saamanti chhaya tekera/ khharanima utheko pariskrit dhukdhuki chha, spandan chha/ yaahaa shristiko raj chha, yaahaa itihash chha/ yaha chha hamro aafnai gawrabhpurna asitwa/ ma yesh deshko sampurna birata ra bijayeko mulshutra! Hatiyar!”

(“Here is devotion, here is struggle/ standing on the shadow of feudatory/
transformed heart beat based on the ashes of struggle/ here is the dominance of
creation, here is history/ we have glorious history here/ I am the key weapon of
the victory of the country! Weapon!”; my trans.; Lamsal 4).

The art of Dalit community has been playing important role in transforming Nepal into developed and powerful country. However, the roles of Dalit community have not been written in any history. Traditional history ignores the stories of marginalized community. Therefore, they always remain at the margin. Aaran itself is the symbol of innovation. Our ancestors could defeat enemies with the help of swords which were made in the Aaran. The skillful workers of Aaran often get insulted in the name of caste. The glorious story of Aaran could not be heard.

Identity of Subaltern People

The ruling class people create stereotype identity of Dalit community in the society. Dalit community are made Women are mostly identified either by their husband’s name or by the stereotype identity particularly in male dominated society. Particularly women from Dalit community are doubly under shadowed. “Malai thaha chha/ malai kashaile Junimaya bhandainan/ kashaile naari dekhdainan, naari sochdainan/ chhelangiko swashni ra budhi kamini” (“I know/ nobody calls me by the name of Junimaya/ nobody sees me as woman/ nobody considers me as mother/only as Chhelangi’s wife and old kamini”; my trans.; Lamsal 261). Junimaya wants to be identified by her own name. However, being as woman she has no individual identity. The male dominated society does not recognize her by personal identity.

High and low caste is a discourse made by cunning people who wanted to suppress weak and uneducated people. They often divide people into different groups in the name of caste and make them feel their low status in the society so that they can not talk to them looking at their eyes. “Naagaarikta merai ho/ naagaariktama taashiyeko/ duai kaan dekhine tashbir pani merai ho/ baaki ta mero bhannu ke chha ra?/ name aarkaile diyeko/ thar aarkaile bhandiyeko/ jaat aarkaile tokeko” (“This is my own citizenship/ photo attached on the citizenship is also mine / both ears and picture are mine/ except them what are mine? Name has been given/ caste also has determined”; my trans.; Lamsal 52). The people from Dalit community has no right to choose who they want to be. Their names and status in the society are determined by the discourse made by high caste people.

Nepal fought wars with Tibet, China, and East India Company in history using the local weapons made by Dalit community and got victory over most of the countries. However, no historian included the name of any Kami in the history. The role played

by Dalit community in nation building in past was ignored in the traditional history. Similarly, Hem Karna Shen did not realize the sacrifice of Thule Kami. He insulted Thule Kami instead of awarding him. Therefore, Thule Kami left Makwanpur. “Kasaile dekhena Thule Kami kata gayo bhanera.” ‘Nobody saw where Thule Kami went’ (my trans.; Lamsal 125). Most of the subaltern disappeared from the society without being recognized by the society.

The sculpture of gods and goddesses are worshiped but nobody raises questions who made these sculptures. People simply enjoy art but they are reluctant to inquire about history of the creator (my trans.; Lamsal 44). Dalit’s works are considered as low form of work. The rulers consider the creation by Dalits to be inferior to those by high caste individual. As a result, they frequently overlook the sacrifices made by the subaltern people. “Raajaaharuko matra itihash lekhiyo/ parinaam: parinaam chhopiyo, shram chhopiye”; (‘Only rulers’ history was written/ finally: results and efforts were under shadowed’; my trans.; Lamsal 171). Efforts of minority group in nation building has been under shadowed. However, some level of consciousness has appeared in young generation. “Naya pustama aayeko chha chetanako naya Taranga/ aandolit chhan uniharu aafai bhitra/ra samman uthna khojeko chhan muktiko jhanda liyera tapai yeslai/ nayako swar bhannuhunchha ki bidroha?” ‘Youths are conscious/ they are revolting within themselves/ and new generation seems to be more conscious’ (my trans.; Lamsal 10). New generation from Dalit community are raising voice against such ill-practices of the society. However, the society accuses them of bringing chaos in social harmony. The high caste people do not seem to be realizing their inhuman acts.

Different tasks are given by the society on the basis of their caste in caste based society. The Dalit community is often tasked with creating statues of gods, yet they are barred from entering temples to worship the very statues they craft. The creations are worshiped but the creators are accepted as they have same status in the society. They are often misbehaved by the high caste people in the name of caste. However, their sufferings are not addressed by the state.

Conclusion

The text explores the ignored histories associated with glory and creation of Dalit, particularly Kami community in order to bring positive change in their status in Nepali society. The researcher argues that caste discrimination ruins social harmony. Moreover, such ill practices do not lead society towards prosperity. The inferior complex, psychological fear and economic status of Thule Kami are constructed by the caste discrimination of Nepali society. Although Thule and his community have been playing important role in leading society towards prosperity by making different instruments, weapons and statues of god, the historians and rulers never identify their sacrifice for the society. They always remain at the bottom of social hierarchy. As a

result, their voices always remain unheard. Thule and his new generation want respect and equal status as other people have in the society. They want to take part in every nation building activities. They have been sacrificing their art, skill, knowledge and sweat. However, the state or ruling class people have no faith in them. They consider Dalit community as thief or deceiver. So Dalit community are subaltern and voiceless. Thule Kami was accused of stealing iron by the king Hem Karna Shen even if he had no evidence. Thule could not prove him as innocent because he had no access to power to clarify himself. The plight of Thule Kami represents the plight and suffering of entire Dalit community. Like Thule Kami, many artists from Dalit community have not been identified by the state. The epic depicts very harsh picture of the society which is prevailed for long time in Nepali society. The paper tries to show ugly pictures of the society with the hope of avoiding such ill practices of society in order to bring peace and harmony in the society. The researcher believes that there is no possibility of prosperity unless people are treated equally.

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