

Dual Identity of Pattharkatta (Kusbadiya) Community of Nepal

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Abstract

Caste and ethnic categories are social and historical products. In the case of Pattharkatta², there was only (Tarai Dalit) caste identity among all Pattharkattas of Nepal before a couple of decades. Most of them shared origin myths, history, social memories (knowledge), and livelihood strategies. After the penetration of ethnic identity politics, there was a division among the Pattharkatta. Some of them claimed that they were Kusbadiya, not Pattharkatta, and listed themselves in an ethnic community of Nepal. The rest of them continued their caste identity and cultural practices. The government of Nepal also recognized both Pattharkatta and Kusbadiya. The researcher is interested to explore why the community changed and continued its identity. Is it possible to be a caste and an ethnic group at the same time? If yes, how and in which contexts? What are different evidences and cultural practices that support their claims of Kusbadiya and Pattharkatta? What are the motivational factors of identity change? What are the cultural relations between the Pattharkatta and Kusbadiya? By employing a mixed methods design, the researcher explored that the community has a dual identity. Politically active elites of Pattharkatta were influenced by ethnic activists in the name of the social security fund. When the marginalized community was lured by a per-month bonus, they were ready to change their identity. In spite of similar stories of origin and cultural practices, the community is officially recognized by two different names. There is no fixity to ethnic differences and boundaries of caste ethnic identity.

Keywords: ethnicity, identity, caste, culture, strategy

Introduction

Pattharkattas are scattered in the Western Terai region and temporarily stayed in Kathmandu and other major cities of Nepal. They claimed that Kapilvastu, Banke, Nawalparasi, Rupandehi, were homelands, and the rest of the settlements of different districts of Nepal were newly migrated in search of livelihood options. The total population of Pattharkatta was 552 which was the lowest number among Dalits (CBS, 2001) but in 2011, the Central Bureau of Statistics mixed Pattharkatta and Kusbadiya into a single category and their population was 3182 (CBS, 2011).

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2 Listed in Tarai Dalit group as well as indigenous community of Nepal.

Some Pattharkattas changed themselves into Kusbadiya, who have been recognized as indigenous peoples by National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act 2002 and categorized as an endangered ethnic group by the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and the (NFDIN) in 2004. Being enlisted under an endangered ethnic group, every member of Kusbadiya received social security fund per month from the government. On the other hand, in the name of Pattharkatta, the same community was listed under the Dalit category in the official document of the government.

The people of a community named Pattharkattas were listed and treated as a Dalit caste group of Tarai whereas the community named Kusbadiya was listed under “Indigenous Nationalities” or *Adibashi Janajatis*. The origin of caste and ethnic community must have two different stories in the same community. The origin of caste system was thought to have developed in South Asia towards the end of the Vedic period (Banerjee-Dube, 2010). On the basis of this contradiction, the researcher wanted to explore their traditional culture which will be evidence of their caste and ethnic identity. Some of the questions of the research are: What are their religions, myths, social memories, and cultural practices of being Pattharkatta and Kusbadiya? What are the motivations and exercises for changing identity from caste to ethnic or vice versa? How the cultural practices been changing with identity? Moreover, this article tries to explore the politics of dual identity and other different practices of the same community.

Research Methodology

This research is based on the historical-cultural dimension of ethnographic work in which the local historical process that informed the Pattharkattas response in total socio-cultural aspects. Ethnography is current history that is not only informed by the past but something that will also indicate an outline of the next emerging moment (Holmberg, 2006). The descriptive and exploratory design has been chosen because it is helpful to dig out the history of culture and livelihood changes among them.

The primary data was collected from field visits in September-October 2018. Because of their temporary migration to Kathmandu and other urban areas, it was difficult to meet them in their village. Therefore, I have collected and interviewed them in Kathmandu too. Major sources of primary data were the people from Kapilbastu, Rupandehi, and their temporary stay in Kathmandu.

Kapilbastu district was selected purposely because there were the largest numbers of them. Out of 66 households, 33 households in a single cluster were selected for a detailed study. But when I visited the field, there were people only in 15 households in this village. The rest of the household dwellers migrated to the urban areas of Tarai and Kathmandu. Therefore, I decided to incorporate 15 respondents of Pattharkatta in

Rupandehi (Butawal) and Kathmandu (Chabhil, Basundhara, Buspark, and Koteswor). I was able to interview only 30 households in total. Key informant interviews, observation, and case studies are the main methods of data collection.

Identity Discourse

Mary Cameron (2010) analyzes the genesis of the term Dalit, Dality identity, its etymological meaning, and its usage among intellectuals, academia, and the everyday life world of common people. The term was first introduced to Nepal by India's most famous untouchable, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar when he visited Nepal in 1956 (Cameron, 2010). It was used in the name of the first organization in Nepal to address untouchable issues, Rastiya Nepal Dalit Jana Vikash Parishad in 1967. The term Dalit is still unfamiliar to people and Dalit themselves in many rural communities in Nepal.

The two sets of discourses for and against the continuation of Dalit symbols are presented throughout Cameron's writing. By presenting discussions of the internet community, nepaldalitinfor, the author vividly analyzes the retaining and elimination of the symbol Dalit. Therefore, the word Dalit captures the legacy of unique oppression and the experience of separate identity in Nepal. In the defense of the criticism of the term an Indian product, the author quotes Om Prakash VK Gahatraj "it is right, many things are imported from India including foods, and culture because we are an open border. Truly when Baba Saheb Ambedkar came to Nepal in 1956 and had important discussions with the Dalit leaders of Nepal, since then the word Dalit was used to address this community" (Cameron, 2010: 18). Chaitanya Mishra argued that ethnicity and identity are fluid, in-the-making, human endeavor. It does not ever 'completed' nor it appears, can be left unstarted. Like all historical processes, ethnicity meanders, enters into rapids, and then meanders again (Mishra, 2012). His claim is that ethnic identity is contextual and strategies of opportunity for power and resources.

Similarly, the terms 'Janjati' (ethnic nationality) and 'Adibasi' are newly coined and asserted identities by the previous Matwali people of Nepal. David Gellner (1997) noted that ethnic activists (from 6 ethnic communities) formed Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) in 1990 (Gellner, 1997). They added other communities and the name of the organization Nepal Adibasi Janjati Mahasangh. The main criteria for being member of the organization were 'non-Hindu. The Khas of western Nepal were considered as Adibasi, by contrast, NEFEN has turned down an approach by the leader of Dalit organizations on the grounds that their cultural identity is ineluctably Hindu. They would, for the same reason rejected Tarai dwellers other than the Tharu and similar groups (Gellner, 1997:22). It also reinstated that ethnic identity was made of category and newly applied in the state mechanism in Nepal.

Prayag Raj Sharma (2004) mentioned stratification in the Nepalese model of caste system in hierarchical order and social mobility of the Dalits in his article, “caste, social mobility and Sanskritisation”. The stratification is based upon Nepal’s old legal code and as described in the structural functional model. He stated that the Tagadhari, Matwali (salvable and unenslaveable) , Paninachalne Choichito Halnunaparne and Paninachalne Choichito Halnuparne Nepalese are all ranked along an axiom of purity and pollution. The Dom, Chamar and Paswan caste groups are said to be associated with specific traditional occupations. He describes briefly the Nepalese caste system that was codified in the national legal code of 1854, which is a very good historical description of the Muluki Ain about Nepalese on the basis of caste and occupation. Tarai Dalit were regarded extreme untouchable and Pattharakattas were under the category of Choichito halnuparne. This book describes the caste system, caste ranking, and social mobility but lacks information about the Pathharkatta caste in particular.

Chhitra Budhathoki (2012) argued that, now days, Pattharakattas of Banke and Bardiya like to recognize themselves as Kushbadiya rather than Pattharkatta. Same people in Rupandhei and Nawalparasi have claimed themselves as Kushbadiya. The word Kushbadiya is derived from Kuchbandiy or Kushbandiya. Government of Nepal has enlisted the Kushbadiya as one of the indigenous people of Nepal in 2001, but it was not clear. After few year of the government’s recognition, Pattarkattha people who are also known as Kushbandhia claimed that they are Kushbadiya. Pattarkattha people of Banke and Bardiya organized under their ethnic organization, Kuchbandhiya Uthan Samaj. Activitis of this organization informed and made Pattharkatta as indigenous people. Now most of the Pattarkattha people want to identify themselves as indigenous people. But many people living around the Pattharkatta settlement argued that pattarkatthas are dalits. In Kapilbastu, pattarkattha people are found to be associated with dalit people. They also recognize themself as dalit because other peoples in terai have treated as dalit for centuries (Budhathoki, 2012).

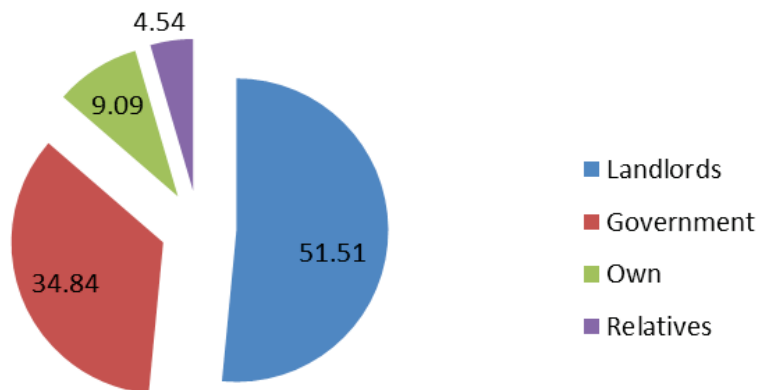
“Ethnography of Terai Dalits” (NNDSWO, 2006) covered plenary introduction of Pattharkatta rather than detail historical background, culture and livelihood. It included about population distribution, physical features: surname and hierarchy, arts, education, health, migration, local leadership, gender issues, indigenous knowledge. It has also studied about Pathharkatta in these sectors though the book seems to be just, which is not enough for further study. The Nepal Dalit Commission (NDC) identified and listed three categories of Dalits in Nepal. Among them Terai Dalits are most marginalized sections and among them Pattharakatta is the lowest socio-economic group (Dahal, 2010). Studies showed that the traditional occupation is one of the main sources of livelihood for the Dalits. Both historical documents and social memories of the people showed that Pattharkatta was a community of Dalits.

Occupation and Economy of the Community

The traditional occupation of the Pattharkattas was carving stone grinding slates, called “*Silauto and Loro*”. The occupation has been still continued by both the Pattharkatta and Kusbadiya their main source of living. Both of them shared the same social memories or knowledge about stone carving. Most of them are not satisfied with their traditional occupation. The reasons for the dissatisfaction with their traditional occupation are low social prestige and minimum income in spite of hard work. The occupations followed by the Dalit communities are considered as having low social prestige and low income.

Landholding size of a family is the important determinant of the economy of a household in a society whose economy is largely a subsistence economy. The land was considered both sign of prestige as well as a backbone of livelihood for many communities in Nepal. In terms of land ownership, the Pattharkattas is known as a landless community. They have been utilizing public and landlords’ land. The unregistered land used for housing and agriculture by the community are of various types. The following graphical presentation depicts clearly the portion of different kinds of lands of used by the Pattharkattas.

Percentage of Types of Unregistered Land Occupied by Pattharkattas



Percentage of Types of Unregistered Land Occupied by Pattharkattas

This presentation indicates that they were economically poor, socially neglected and politically powerless community. Among the informants, 51.51% were living in the land of landlords in their surroundings. For the sake of economic opportunity, they compromised their name though they followed occupation and culture as before.

Origin and History

It is not very easy to trace the origin of Pattharkattas due to their scattered population. Though, many of them do not know much regarding their origin and migration.

However, during interviews with a couple of elderly Pattharkattas in the study area, it was learnt that most of them had migrated to Kapilvastu from Muzzafarpur (Bihar) of India some 100 years back. They said that they have been “crushing stones” as an occupation ever since they migrated to this location. The Pattharkattas in this study area believed that their community is derived from the word *Patthar* meaning stone and *Katta* meant to crush as mentioned in the introductory chapter. It was informed that they travelled from one place to another to sell their products. Recently, many of them started to live in Kathmandu to sell their product. They have channel of stone suppliers from Birganj to Nepalganj.

Origin Myth

Each and every community has own story of origin and history. According to Srilal Pattharkatta of Kapilbastu, they are descendents of Hanuman, Hindu god of monkey head and tail. He mentioned the war of Ram and Ravan in Hindu epic Ramayan two great monkeys named Nal and Nil with extra human power involved in the war. Both Nal and Nil were physically very similar with monkeys but they had superhuman power. Pattharkatta believed that these superhuman monkey were their ancestor. By the time of war, there was an army of monkeys and Jamwant was their advisor. Advisor was responsible for controlling monkey army. He had soul authority of mobilization of the army. The monkey army was famous for war game. Hanuman who fought for Ram was the king of monkey. They wanted to fight against Ravan but it was difficult to cross the ocean. Then, Nal and Nil went to Jamwant to get advice. Since they had chisels and hammers, they can make bridge with help the tools. Jamwant advised them to make stone bridge over the ocean. The Nal and Nil inscribed the name ‘Ram’ on the stone and put it at the corner of ocean. The stone floated over the water. They repeated the task over and over again and finally they were able to construct the bridge by which monkey army were able to cross the ocean. Monkey army fought against Ravan at Lanka. Ravan was defeated and monkey army returned to Ayodhya. Ram knew that Nal and Nil were the ones who brought this noval idea of stone bridge over the ocean. Ram was impressed by the work of Nal and Nil. He Blessed them to live by stone work. Then, Nal and Nil continued stone cutting as their occupation. Therefore, Nal and Nil are considered ancestor of Pattharkatta who inherited the art of working with stone from Hindu epic Ramayana. Both the Kusbadiya and Pattharkatta believed on the same story.

There is another mythical story of their origin. Thousands of people died because of Haija Mahamari (Cholera epidemic) in the Betiya kingdom about thousand years back. The king was worried to control the disease. He called the meeting of all people to know if anyone have idea to stop the Haija. The King also announced that he will fulfill all demands of the successful healer or controller of the disease. People who attended this meeting informed the king about an old man called Nanuchotu Pattharkatta who

had knowledge to stop Haija. The king called him. When he was in front of the king, the king asked him, “what was the cause of cholera?” Nanuchotu answered that cholera came from Masanghat (graveyard). The king was surprised and asked again, “ How did this happen?”. Nanuchotu dug out the coffin from the graveyard. He separated the cloth that was wrapped around the corpse, and burnt the corpse and cloth separately. Then, the Haija was stopped. The king was pleased with Nanuchotu and asked him,” what do you want?” Nanuchotu replied that he wanted a small hut to live. The king got surprised because of such minor demand of the Nanuchotu. If he demanded the royal kingship, the king had to give him. Then, the king gave him small hut as he wished and he spent his life in the hut. Nanuchotu was not greedy person. He became happy with the small hut given by the king. Today’s Pattharkattas are the descendent of the Nanuchotu Maharaj. They worshipped Nanuchotu as Nanudeu. Non-possessive characteristics of Nanuchotu inherited to the offspring’s of the Pattharkatta.

Some of them believed that they were originated from big stone. They were named Pattharkatta because they were not only expert on stone carving but also their traditional occupation was stone cutting. They argued that their name “Pattharkatta” was derived from their livelihood occupation. This occupational naming system of the group was common in south Asia. Lather workers were named Chamar, oil producer were Teli, rat catcher were Musahar etc. This argument has close link with South Asian literatures like Indian tribal groups were named for ruler’s convenience of recognition and monopoly of coercion. Those who persisted in wandering found themselves the object of resistance, and began to be stigmatized as criminal or untouchable tribe (Chatarjee 1993). Similarly, Gyan Prakash argued that constructing animal and/or wild metaphor upon the tribal people was creating legitimacy upon the category to make landless slave (Prakash 1991). The pattharkatta claimed that they are the aboriginals of the land though they are semi-nomadic. They did not stay one place permanently. When newcomers came near their settlement, they moved to new and isolated place. They claimed that their previous settlements were captured by migrated people. Fulak Pattharkatta, an old man around 60 years, told,” we become strangers in the place where our grand fathers taught us hunting, and the wild games were also disappeared. Newcomers stare us when we go to the river and the hillsides to collect stones for carving. Some of them chased us”. This is not the end of the story of the Pattharkatta people. They were behaved like alien creatures within homeland. They were called extremely lower caste and even Tarai Dalits did not allow their access in their community.

Being nomadic hunter and gatherer, they entered into Nepal before unification and demarcation of Nepal-India border. They do not have knowledge about their arrival in Nepal. They argued that there were few numbers of Pattharkatta in India too. Their livelihood strategies were stone artifacts and wild lives hunting. When the livelihood

resources became exhausted in their residential areas, they moved to new place and by this way they came in Nepal long time back. Since their access to hunting has been prohibited by the policy of the community forestry Program and their access to stones has been restricted by the local government and migration forced them to live one place permanently. Then they applied multiple livelihood strategies for survival. They are scattered from Banke, Bardiya to Morang-Jhapa districts of the Tarai. They recently started registered/bought land on their own name. Third country migration, India migration, wage labour at towns and temporary migration for marketing of stone artifacts were their preferred livelihood strategies these days.

Clan History

The pattarkatta are patrilineal society. They traced their lineage from the line of father. They have at least seven clan (kuri). They are: sankat, soda, bhais, maraiya, Utbar, Bangariya and Lohiya. These seven Kuris are hierarchically ordered according to their social status. Sankat and soda are believed to be wise, strong and forward in every respect. Likewise Bangaria and Lohiya are at the lowest level. There is interesting story regarding the wise and forward of their clan. Once upon a time, there was a king who called intellectuals for a meeting. Sankat reached the meeting first followed by soda, bhais, maraiya and utbar. The last arrivals were Bangaria and Lohiya. A man from Sankat kuri was very intellectual. This early attendance of meeting became rule of hierarchy within the Pattharkatta. However, they do not have any sort of discrimination between the high and low rank within their communities.

According to the old Pattharkattas, they were divided into two groups on the basis of their traditional occupations. Those who were involved in stone cutting were Pattharkatta and those who were involved in the broom making are called Kushbadiya. They considered all Kushbadiya to be Pattharkatta and all Pattharkatta as Kushbadiya. Some old Pattharkattas keep them as distinct with Kushbadiya. The old people asked to indentify Pattharkatta or Kushbadiya on the basis of Kuri status. This indicates that Pattharkatta do have different social status vis-a-vis Kushbadiya. But younger Pattharkatta tried to remove the difference among the Pattharkatta and the Kusbadiya. Many of them claimed that both the groups are subgroup of the Pattharkatta.

Identity

Because of religious and linguistic proximity with plain origin people Pattharkatta were regarded as Hindu lower caste or Dalit. Culturally they are different from the mainstream Hindu caste culture. There is debate among themselves and ethnic elites in the name of their ethnic status. Because of the absence of internal hierarchy, concepts of purity, pollution, and intra-discrimination, and untouchability, some of them claimed

that they are Kushbadiya ethnic groups rather than caste groups. By changing the last name from Pattharkatta to Kushbadiya, the same group of people was registered in both Dalit category as well as Indigenous Nationalities. The government of Nepal presents its ambiguous position by listing the same community into two categories by naming two different names: Pattharkatta and Kushbadiya (CBS, 2001). CBS 2011 makes a single category of their population naming Pattharkatta/Kuswadic. Because of their dual recognition as indigenous and Dalit, the identity of the Pattharkatta as Dalit as well as indigenous is still in question within both organizations and society at large. Both the pattharkatta and Kushbadiya are locally treated as Dalits by other communities and people do not accept food and water from them. Even Dalits considered the Kushbadiya as having lower social status. The Kusbadiy named pattharkatta were confused with their own identity. Harish Pattharkatta from Kapibastu stated that when he was interested to become an executive member of Kusbadiya Utthan Sangh, he was refused only because of being pattharkatta³. NEFIN identified and recognized Pattharkatta (Kushbadiya) as indigenous people by the act of 2002. In 2004, they formed thenational-level organization the Kushbadiya Utthan Sangha in Nepalgunj and became a member of NEFIN. Kushbadiya written group registered themselves in NEFIN and they were put into the endangered group then each member of kushbadiya gets Rs. 1000 as social security bonus from the government. This connection was built with the help of Dr. Om Gurung who was chairperson of Identification and Recommendation of Ethnic People High Commission Task Force. The Pattharkatta also became aware of their identity due to the strong movements concerning indigenous rights by NEFIN and advocacy of their association. They become much more motivated to identify their identity after the Kushbadiya began to receive social security allowances from the government. Now, most of the Pattharkatta identified themselves as Kushbadiya. If they were asked, “Who are you, Pattharkatta or Kushbadiya?” They answered that they were both. They were Pattharkatta before becoming Kushbadiya. Harish said that they we both old Pattharkatta and new Kushabadiya. He argued that because of government funds everyone preferred to name Kushbadiya rather than Pattharkatta.

The Kushbadiya has now been recognized as the indigenous people of Nepal. Because of their poverty, even though they named themselves Kushbadiya, other caste ethnic communities around them discriminate against them as untouchable. Harish told me that other people did not want to sit near and eat with them. They were also not allowed to enter local teashops and restaurants at Kapilbastu and Rupandehi. But in Kathmandu, they were not forbidden to enter teashops and hotels.

3 Conversation with Harish Pattharkatta on 27 Sept 2018.

Conclusion

There is debate among themselves and ethnic elites in the name of their ethnic status. Because of the absence of internal hierarchy, concepts of purity, pollution, and intra discrimination, and untouchability, some of them claimed that they are Kushbadiya ethnic groups rather than caste groups. By changing the last name from Pattharkatta to Kushbadiya, the same group of people was registered both the Dalit category as well as Indigenous Nationalities. The government of Nepal presents an ambiguous position by listing the same community into two categories by naming two different names: Pattharkatta and Kushbadiya (CBS, 2001). CBS 2011 makes a single category of their population naming Pattharkatta/Kushbadiya. Because of their dual recognition as indigenous and Dalit, the identity of the Pattharkatta as Dalit as well as indigenous is still in question within both organizations and society at large. Both the pattharkatta and Kushbadiya are locally treated as Dalits by other communities and people do not accept food and water from them. The Kushbadiy named pattharkatta were confused with their own identity. NEFIN identified and recognized Pattharkatta (Kushbadiya) as indigenous people by the act of 2002. In 2004, they formed their national-level organization the Kushbadiya Utthan Sangha in Nepalgunj, and became a member of NEFIN. Kushbadiya written group registered themselves in NEFIN and they were put into the endangered group then each member of kushbadiya gets Rs. 1000 as social security bonus from the government. This connection was built with the help of Dr. Om Gurung who was chairperson of Identification and Recommendation of Ethnic people's High Commission Task Force. The Pattharkatta also became aware of their identity due to the strong movements concerning indigenous rights by NEFIN and advocacy of their association. They become much more motivated to identify their identity after the Kushbadiya began to receive social security allowances from the government. Now most of the Pattharkatta identified themselves as Kushbadiya. If they were asked, "Who are you, Pattharkatta or Kushbadiya?" They answered that they were both. They were Pattharkatta before becoming Kushbadiya. They argued that because of government fund everyone preferred to name as Kushbadiya rather than Pattharkatta. The Kushbadiya have now been recognised as indigenous people of Nepal. Because of their poverty, even though they were named themselves Kushbadiya, other caste ethnic communities around them discriminate them as untouchable.

I focused on the traditional occupation, culture and identity of the Pattharkattas in Kapilvastu-Rupandehi and their occupational changes in the recent times and their impacts in their livelihood. Their traditional occupation was stonework but because of new technological inventions and interventions to it, they are forced to search the other options of occupations to earn their livelihood. This very transitional phase of the Pattharkattas in their livelihood changes is focused in my study. Doing so, I have focused on the reasons on their occupational changes and its impacts on their livelihood.

They have still dual identity because of identity politics and extremely marginalized bonus policy from the government. This study concluded that identity is fluid phenomena of the people rather static forever. Marginalized communities changed their identity if their livelihood became easy. Renaming is considered as livelihood strategies at large because rs. 1000 per month per person is big deal for the marginalized communities. This is the good example how state policy help to create dual identity of particular group of people.

As many research showed, co-opting and drifting are major processes of asserting multiple identity and category at the same time, the Pattharkatta are adopting the same line. In south Asia, a community can belong to more than one religion, caste/ethnic group, and class at the same time. They do not have concept of exclusive categorical identity and religion. For instance, the Newar of the Kathmandu valley follow Buddhism and Hinduism within single family and community. Same person worship both Hindu Goddesses and Buddha. Similarly, Pattharkatta claimed both ethnic identity. Some of the claimed Dalit (previous untouchable) and some of them claimed they were Kushbadiya (newly named highly endangered indigenous community of Nepal). There is both politics of number for the ethnic elites as well as access to economic resources for the marginalized Pattharkatta.

Acknowledgment

I am thankful to University Grant Commission, the authors who have referred in this article, and the informants who have shared their stories during my fieldwork. The article is developed on the research carried out under the Small Research Development and Innovation Grant (SRDIG-73/74- H&S-11) of the University Grant Commission.

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