

Changing Caste Relations in Mudkhu Bhanjyang: An Anthropological Overview

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze the changing caste relations in recent years in Mudkhu of Tarkeshwor Municipality of Kathmandu. Nepal has been declared a Federal Democratic Republic State, the political transformations have been made. Through a transformative process in Nepal, many existing social norms and patterns have been changed and some others have been reformed. With changing conditions of social structure and cultural practices, the Nepali caste system is also being changed. The rigidity of the caste system is changing. Due to various reasons and efforts flexibility is being taken place against caste-based discrimination in society. In recent decades, the structure and the functioning of the caste system and its economic and social aspects have greatly changed. There is an increase in class consciousness and a decrease in caste consciousness. It is, perhaps, because of the educational system, modernization, changing livelihood strategies etc.

Keywords: Caste, Discrimination, Livelihoods, Reduce, Transformation

1. Introduction

In Nepal, the caste system was officially abolished in 1963 by the Civil Code¹. As a rule, the state of Nepal cannot discriminate against any citizen in the application of general laws on grounds of religion, race, gender, caste, tribe, origin, language, ideological conviction or any of these. Similarly, no person shall, on the ground of caste, descent, community or occupation, be subject to racial discrimination and ‘untouchability’ in any form. Such a discriminatory act is to be punished and the victim is entitled to compensation as provided by the law. The country continues to have legal provisions prohibiting caste discrimination in the present constitution.

In the present time, Nepal has been declared a Federal Democratic Republic State, the political transformations have been made. Through a transformative process in Nepal, many existing social norms and patterns have been changed and many are being reformed. With the changing condition of social structure and cultural practices, the Nepali caste system is also being changed. The rigidity of the caste system is changing (Ghurye, 1961).

In this context, what is the practice of the caste system **in Mudkhu Bhanjyang**? Were the structure and the functioning of the caste system and its economic and social aspects

¹The first unified law enacted on 1st Bhadra, 2020 (1963) which officially abolished discrimination based on class, caste or region.

changed there? For this, I selected the Dalits settlement area in **Mudkhu Bhanjyang**, ward No 5 of Tarkeshwor municipality in Kathmandu District and analyzed the changing caste relations. This article presents changing caste relations in Mudkhu Bhanjyang of Kathmandu district.

2. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to analyze the changing caste relations in Mudkhu Bhanjyang in Kathmandu district. Moreover, this study aims to analyze the changing pattern of the caste system and explore the relationship between Non-Dalits and Dalits People in Mudkhu Bhanjyang.

3. Methods of Study and Research Questions

The information was collected by employing both exploratory and descriptive research designs. Primary data have been collected through observation and interviews with Non-Dalits and Dalits People at the village level and required information was collected. Heads of the households, youths and school teachers were interviewed either individually or in small focus groups. Interviews and interactions were conducted outside the house, in school, in the ward Office, or the field. Conversations were allowed to develop organically starting from very general questions such as ‘What exactly is happening to caste? And how is the caste system being changed in contemporary Mudkhu Bhanjyang?’ With this leading question, I began the field study and collected information. The collected information was analyzed systematically. The secondary data were collected from published articles and books.

4. Study Area and People

The study area is **Mudkhu Bhanjyang of Kathmandu district** which is about seven kilometers from Balaju Chok. It is a heterogeneous settlement area, in terms of caste and ethnicity as Rai, Tamang, Magar, Brahmin, Chhetri, Damai, Kami, and Thakuri are the major caste and ethnic groups of this area. There were 260 households in the study village which comprises all caste and ethnic groups. Dalit and Non-Dalit people were selected for the study to know their perception of the caste system and changing relations within it in Mudkhu. Dalit people such as Damai, Kami, Sarki etc (Field Survey, 11th February, 2022) were selected as the respondents of this study and the required information was collected.

5. An Anthropological Overview of the Caste System

Celestine Bougle (1973) states that caste is a Hindu social construct.² The famous book on caste, ‘Homo Hierarchicus’ constructed a textually informed image of caste, portraying two opposing conceptual categories of purity and pollution as the organizing principle of caste structure and hierarchy (Dumont, 1980). These unique core principles of caste hierarchy, according to Dumont, are observed in scriptural formulation as well as in the everyday life of all Hindus. The Dumontian notion of caste puts hierarchy at the centre

² Bougle’s Essays on the Caste System, 1973

and assumes that this more or prevails all over Hindu populations. Dumont's concern was with the traditional social organization from a comparative theoretical point of view. Dumont's (1980) argument became the idea of structure in social anthropology. It legitimates to include in the caste system only what we could call inter-caste relations and not intra-caste relations. Dirks (2001) argues that the most prominent and related transformed traditions are kingship and caste. Dirks argues in pre-colonial South India the social hierarchy was not so much on the ideology of the pure and the impure as on the institution.

In Nepal, in terms of origin, there was no ethnic superiority, inequality and discrimination between the Khas and the Kirants, who had been living for about 5,000 years before the arrival of the Hindu Aryan Brahmins on the Gangetic plains. The Khas believed in Buddhism while maintaining the Mashto religion. Later, during the Mughal invasion, the Vedic orthodox Aryan Brahmins entered the Khasan and Kirant areas of Nepal to preserve their purity and religion. Arya Brahmin, who entered the Khasan kingdom as a helpless refugee after capturing religious literature, succeeded in making Khas a place for a priest and a guru (Aahuti, 2010).

Only after the entry of the Sanatani Vedic Arya Brahmins into Nepal, the Khas and Kirant civilizations were Hinduized here and the Varna Ashram system was imposed on them. After that, ethnic inequality, discrimination and untouchability developed within the Kirant and Khas civilizations as well (Aahuti, 2010). The divided caste system developed over time into small-large, rich-poor, pure-impure castes. In order to prosper, they started fighting each other in the race to exploit each other and become prosperous only. The victorious race declared the defeated race small and themselves great. Those who came to power continued to exploit other castes to make them smaller and lower, and while they were in power forever, they devised many schemes and conspiracies to exploit and oppress others. The defeated caste was untouchable and excluded. Therefore, the ethnic problem that has emerged in Nepal now is the same. During the period of Nepal's history, the Khas caste was the ruler. After that, during the Shah Period and Rana period, the Brahmins and Chhetris were now in power in the state system.

In 1436 BS, Jayasthiti Malla wrote human jurisprudence by applying only 4 letters of Manusmriti. About 474 years after the writing of human jurisprudence, in 1910 BS, Jang Bahadur Rana continued the four-caste system on the basis of Manusmriti and divided the caste into five structures. First, the uppermost Brahmin and Chhetri caste. The second caste is Namasinya Matwali. Third, Masinya Matwali caste. Fourth, Muslims, Christians, etc. caste. Fifth, Untouchables. (Hofer, 1979)

In this way, he continued to follow in his footsteps by classifying the castes. The Muluki Ain drafted in 1910 BS on the basis of Manusmriti, promoted caste discrimination in the political, administrative, sociocultural, economic and educational fields. In particular, the exploitation and oppression of oppressed Dalits, Madhesis, Janajatis, marginalized classes, communities and women were managed by making laws. Dalit discrimination is

decreasing day by day at present. Caste-based discrimination was severely practised in society in the past. However, in recent years, caste restriction has got flexibility.

There are different accounts of social change and transformation in Nepal (Pokarel, 2010). Scholars such as Ahearn (2004) and Fujikura (2004) observe social transformation in Nepal through the examination of policy and practices of pedagogy. Liechty and Rankin analyzed economic dimensions to understand the social process in Nepal. Litechty (2008) stretches the growth and development of the middle class in Kathmandu. He describes the lived experience of the middle class and shows how class is produced and reproduced in everyday practice. The forms of these knowledge, consciousness, and awareness, are determined to a large extent by prevailing structures of human interactions at the time, the structures that are, in turn, affected by the dominant forms of knowledge, consciousness and awareness at the time, (Fujikura, 2004).

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Caste and Social Change

The caste system is a changing phenomenon. At present, the role and relation of the caste has changed greatly. The growth of cities also considerably changed the functioning of the caste system. Not only were commensal inhibitions relaxed but the authority of the Brahmins also came to be questioned. Kingsley Davis (1951) has held that the mobility and changeability of the city make the operation of the caste virtually impossible.

G.S. Ghurye as early as 1965, argued that attacks on hierarchy started with the rise of non-Brahmin movements in the southern provinces of India. These mobilizations generated a new kind of collective sentiment and the feeling of caste solidarity.

M.N. Srinivas (1962) said point that:

“The process of modernization in a caste starts when the ritualistic considerations of caste stratification become considerably less effective, and new attributes are substituted to maintain status. The upper castes, in general, put more emphasis on achieving higher education, higher income, white-collar occupations, and positions of power and influence than on reinforcing their ritualistic endowments.”

M.N. Srinivas (1962) further holds that due to the migration of Brahmins to the towns, the non-Brahmins refused to show the same respect to them that they showed before and inter-caste eating and drinking taboos were also weakened. It may, thus, be said that the structure and the functioning of the caste system and its ritual economic and social aspects were greatly changed in the industrial phase of the British period.

Urbanization and growth of cities also considerably changed the functioning of the caste system. Kingsley Davis (1951) has held that the anonymity, congestion, mobility, secularism and changeability of the city make the operation of the caste virtually impossible.

Mary M. Cameron (1995) in her article “Transformations of Gender and Caste Divisions of Labor in Rural Nepal” writes the history of change in divisions of labour and suggests cultural transformations in caste hierarchy as well as caste divisions of labour in rural Nepal. Similarly, Anupama Rao in her article ‘The Caste Question’ argues relations of caste transform thus challenging caste Hinduism in Indian society.

6.2 Changing Dalit Livelihood in Mudkhu Bhanjyang

Livelihood incorporates the diverse ways in which people make a living and build their worlds (Whitehead 2002). The motives for diversification may vary. Diversification is the survival for the poor, away from poverty for those who are on an upward path, and for the rich accumulation of income and assets. Thus, livelihood diversification is a phenomenon that characterizes survival and income strategies in individuals and households (Subedi, 2014).

Dalit people have adopted different occupations for their livelihood in **Mudkhu Bhanjyang**. At present, very few Dalit people have been involved in their traditional occupation. They are involved in labour, business, teaching, agriculture, foreign employment, transport-related jobs, defence forces which has changed their traditional social status.

The number of foreign employment has increased these days in the Dalit community. A growing remittance economy enabling alternative sources of livelihood has allowed members of the Dalit community to challenge their place in the social hierarchy. There is evidence of changes in caste, gender and power relations at varying degrees at local levels. The most important change can be seen in the caste domain, where there has been a significant reduction in discriminatory practices, more evident in the public than private sphere. Such a situation has brought changes in power relations. Every household, despite their caste/ethnic background, has been engaging in diverse economic activities for survival and to improve their living standard. The Dalits have started to run businesses in the village. Women’s collective activities have equally increased their economic conditions. There has been a greater shift from a caste-based ascribed status system to an achieved one and the individual’s distinctive qualities and attainments are linked to social status in Mudkhu.

6.3 Socio-Cultural Practice in Mudkhu Bhanjayang

Mudkhu Bhanjayang is heterogeneous in terms of caste and ethnicity. Rai, and Tamang, Magar, Brahmin, Chhetri, Damai, Kami, Thakuri are the major groups of the study area. Caste was a determining factor in all aspects of social life in Mudkhu. Socio-cultural practice and tradition is one of the important factors of caste-based transformation. Liston (2005) stated that socio-cultural practice, knowledge, attitudes and natural behavior patterns and transmitted by the members of a particular society. The researcher observed the eating habits, clothing, religious practices, customs, beliefs, fairs festivals and rites and rituals in Mudkhu. Nowadays caste is undergoing considerable changes as a consequence of urbanization, democratization and the spread of education in Mudkhu. Dalit people are

also equally involved as upper-caste people in eating, clothing, religious practices, customs, beliefs, fairs festivals and rites and rituals in Mudkhu. They are not discriminated in any religious and cultural spheres. Upper-caste and Dalit sit and eat together in Mudkhu. Jina's case shows the changing socio-cultural practice in Mudkhu:

“My name is Jina Bhusal. I entered Kathmandu Valley seven years after I got married. My husband went to Saudi Arabia to work in a factory. I was left alone with a little sum of money. My Husband did not send any money to me and I was having a very hard time. My parents suggested I start some sort of business. They helped me a lot and I started a Hotel Business. After engaging in this business, I survived in Kathmandu. This business helped me to earn money on my own. Initially, it was considered a Dalit shop. But now there is no problem. Everyone comes to the Hotel and eats. I am satisfied with the Hotel business.”

(Interview, 12th February, 2023)

At present, Dalit people have changed their traditional occupations and are involved in new occupations like hotel business, teaching, foreign employment, transport-related jobs, defence force etc. This shows that Dalits in Mudkhu Bhajnyang are involved in new occupations rather than their traditional occupation. As a result, their traditional socio-cultural practice has been changed in Mudkhu.

6.4 Education and Caste Transformation

Education is widely accepted that it helps to acquire and develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to address the problems that a person confronts, in a confident and self-reliant manner, which is the essence of human development. Various censuses clearly show that the literacy rate of Dalits has increased substantially. The provision of free education in public schools and provision of free textbooks and scholarships to all Dalit students in many schools encouraged low-income households to send their children to schools. As a result, the number of school-going children especially from poor Dalit households increased. One of the respondents reported that:

“During my childhood and onwards, I more often heard the phrase from non-Dalit ‘don't touch’ which strongly bordered my social life. Similarly, my mother used to say, “If you touch them, you may be caught with sin.” On the other hand, I countlessly saw that if Dalits touched non-Dalits, later used Chhoichhito or Sunpani to be holy/purified themselves. Moreover, non-Dalits used to disseminate that touching textbooks and receiving an education is equal to sinning Dalits, on the next, Dalit parents used to think that people from Sano-Jat like them no need to school their children. Such caste-based perspectives from non/Dalits separated the social and schooling life-world for centuries”

(Interview, 13th February, 2023)

In Mudkhu, there has been a significant increase in school attendance among Dalits (both boys and girls). Moreover, Dalit and 'upper caste' children are treated equally in the school. In school, they eat and play together. The teachers, in general, do not discriminate their students based on caste/ethnic background. The children of poor households, and mostly of the Dalits, do not get an opportunity to study in private (English medium) schools and have been facing challenges in getting jobs in the private sector. Owing to the existence of two types of education systems and the demand for competent human resources by the private sector, socially and economically deprived youths have not been able to engage in an economically better private sector. People of different castes also have different probabilities of getting into new occupations that demand various levels of education. Formal education has enabled the Dalits to diversify their livelihoods. With education above SEE, their first preference is for non-farm regular income; government or non-government jobs. The entry of Dalits into such fields has been possible because of their education and the inclusive social policy of the state. Nepal has made significant improvements in education through progressive policies and programs. Therefore, education is one of the influential factors in the transformation of caste relations in Mudkhu. Educated people encountered caste-based structural thinking and practices. This means literacy has also been considered as an important force to reduce various forms of caste-based discrimination in society Mudkhu.

Education is another factor through which some castes that previously were not dominant in a village, have improved their status. In such cases, the position of the educated families compares even more favorably with that of the former dominant castes families whom they have now replaced. Mobility in caste structure is evidenced by a sense of caste solidarity that exists in the minds of the people of the various castes. This sense of caste unity prevails more among the Dalits than the upper castes.

6.5 Awareness Raising Programs: We Became Aware

In Mudkhu, there are about 40 Dalits families. Twenty or Thirty years ago, they were very poor. They used to work as labourers. The crops they grew or produced were not sufficient even for a year. The wages were also very low. Due to the *Pakho Bari*³, the production was very low. They were unable to send their children to the school. During this time, Legal Literacy Programs started in the village. There would be 'awareness raising programs' on topics including sanitation, saving, family planning, gender equality, caste based discrimination and forest preservation in Mudkhu. Many elders from the Dalit community joined the literacy class and became able to read and write. By this time, many Dalit children were sent to school. Due to education, discrimination on the basis of caste, religion and race decreased in Mudkhu. One of the informants, Kanchha Nepali said "Thirty or forty years ago, it used to be that if high-cast people went to a crowded festival and came back, before going into the house, they would have their body purified with water imbued by gold because, in the crowd, their body may have touched by a Damai, Kami or Sarki. Nowadays, he said, people don't do this. When the researcher asked what

³ less productive land due to unavailability of irrigation

caused the change to happen, he said, "We became aware." He added "We understood that whether you are Brahmin, Chhetri, Damai, Kami or Sarki, if you are cut, we have the same red blood. We realized that our bodies run the same red blood." Significant change can be highlighted by the example exhibited in Kanchha Nepali's insistence that the change came from inside, through people becoming conscious, and aware of the truth in Mudkhu due to the education.

6.6 Inter-caste Marriage Reduces Caste Discrimination

Inter-caste marriage can be seen as one of the major factors against caste based discrimination in Mudkhu. Inter-caste Marriage among the caste groups like Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai, Damai, and Kami are common in Mudkhu. It has become one of the major factors in ending the traditional caste system in Nepali society on the condition of acceptance of inter-caste marriage.

Dr Ambedkar showed some ways to minimize the effect of the caste system with inter-marriages and inter-dinning. Marriage is considered a sacred bond and if it is inter-caste then people of different castes will get to know each other and will develop mutual understanding among them; they will get to know that they are not different from each other. Thus the people removed a misconception of religion.

In recent years, inter-caste relations and intermarriages between Dalits and non-Dalits in Nepal have increasingly grabbed a great deal of attention from media, activists, and scholars (Ahuti 2010; Kansakar and Ghimire 2009). Intermarriages in particular are usually indicative of social interaction across group boundaries as social equals (Kalrnijn 1998). The frequency of inter-caste marriage among upper-caste groups has indeed increased over the past few decades as Nepali society undergoes massive economic, political, and cultural changes.

According to inter-caste married couples, "inter-caste marriage would help to solve caste-based discrimination because if their son/daughter married with a lower caste, they believed that high caste would stop to discriminate to low caste whether they accepted marriage or not. Some so-called high caste families were ready to accept low caste as their son or daughter-in-law's caste." The researcher asked what the condition of the intermarriage system was in the past. They replied "There was but they could not dare to accept because of social prestige and relatives pressures. They used to meet out of the village." After a long time, the high caste is ready to accept the low caste as their son-in-law/daughter-in-law. The majority of couples had confidence that caste-based discrimination would come to an end due to inter-caste Marriage. Love and affection, age factor, and good moral character of lower caste youth are taken as major inspiring factors for inter-caste marriage in Mudkhu. Likewise, modernization, sanskritization, migration, education, identity-based movement, mass media, and political ideology are some of the external factors of inter-caste marriage in Mudkhu.

6.7 Dalit's Movement and Government Policy of Affirmative Action and its Impacts on Caste System in Study Area.

Mudkhu is located approximately 8.5 km away from the capital city, Kathmandu. Most of the organizations related to Dalits are established in Kathmandu. They are organizing a program for the rights and identity of Dalits community. Several marches and mass gatherings of Dalits took place. Dalit men and women from Mudkhu joined hands to assert their rights at a rally in Kathmandu. One of the Dalit community member, Kanchha Nepali reported that:

The march focused on creating awareness around institutionalized caste-based discrimination in state mechanisms, police and the judiciary, to start to address what is a major obstacle to Dalits in claiming their rights.

He added that:

Among the major demands made by our leaders are reservations in promotion and jobs in private and public sectors for Dalits and backward classes and an increase in educational scholarships for the backward community students.

Dalits of Mudkhu became aware of their rights and identity by being involved in such marches, mass gatherings and rallies in Kathmandu. It helped to decrease caste-based discrimination in Mudkhu. Dalits have been at the forefront of every struggle and movement for social transformation. The Dalit community has achieved a lot through the Dalit movement. The Interim Constitution 2063 BS included many rights of the Dalits. Later, the constitution of Nepal, 2072 provided special rights to the Dalits which includes the Dalit shall have the rights to participate in all bodies of the state based on the principle of proportional inclusion. Special provision shall be made by law for the empowerment, representation and participation of the Dalit community in public services as well as other sectors of employment. It helped to end the caste discrimination from Mudkhu.

Several legal documents, such as the 2063 Interim Constitution, the Constitution of 2072 and the Caste Based Discrimination and Untouchability (offence and punishment) Act 2011 grant Dalits equal access to public spaces. Affirmative action is being implemented in Nepal for the transformation of caste-based exploitative social structure. The affirmative action policy opened the jobs to Dalits in government jobs. That provided the idea and power to eradicate the discriminatory caste system as a whole.

6.8 How to avoid Caste Untouchability ?

Untouchability is the practice of labeling a group of people regarded as 'untouchables', as ascribed in the Vedic Hindu literature to persons of "high caste" or persons excluded from the caste system resulting in the segregation and persecution from the people regarded as "higher" caste. Caste untouchability is a legal crime. The government has already declared Nepal as a caste untouchability-free nation. However, discrimination based on caste has

not stopped yet in the society. Even now, people are beaten by the so-called upper castes in many places because they are Dalits.

One of the respondents responded that “discrimination against Dalits has not stopped in the society even now. Dalits are being tortured even when the water is stagnant or when they touch things inside the house. It is the educated people who discriminate against Dalits and even ban temples”. In this context, the researcher asked him “How can caste untouchability be stopped from the general public?” He further reported that:

“Discrimination or untouchability based on caste, creed, community or occupation has been going on in our society for a long time. Earlier, they were classified as upper caste and lower caste based on work. Caste untouchability is still entrenched in our Nepali society due to the lack of public awareness. To eradicate it, it is necessary to raise public awareness. All conscious citizens have an important role to play in ending discrimination and untouchability.”

(Interview, 13th February, 2023)

To end caste untouchability, first of all, it is necessary to spread awareness in every individual and society. Of course, in recent times most people have been educated. The people of all districts and Urban Municipality and Rural Municipality are being literate. However strict action should be taken against such discriminators to eradicate caste untouchability from Dalit community in our society.

Another respondent Shanti Nepali, aged 42 responded that “to bring down the whole caste system one has to destroy the religious ideas or the misconceptions that are in the mind of people.” She focused on various problems that arose through the caste. “No complaints have been lodged against the perpetrators of caste untouchability. Not only sound education but his alertness and dedication are most required. For that, we have to start from our home, family and society, only then can we build a new prosperous Nepal by eradicating such social bad practices and bad cultures.” She pointed out that “the main cause of all these problems is the state and the political parties. Which has been becoming an obstacle to the overall change rather than the part.

(Interview, 13th February, 2022)

Another respondent responded that “caste untouchability has been eradicated by the state but has not been eradicated from the minds of the people. It is not enough just to make laws; it is not a matter of finding out crimes and events by oneself. The law excludes those who discriminate as Dalits, but here Dalits are despising Dalits as lower and upper castes.”

The upper castes will not be able to despise the Dalit class if the untouchability of the Dalit does not exist in the society. First, all the Dalits must unite and end untouchability. The state must take strict action against such discrimination to eradicate caste untouchability.

7. Conclusion

Caste-based discrimination in society has decreased over time, with the caste system's restrictions becoming more flexible. Discriminatory practices such as segregated seating arrangements and restrictions on resources with non-Dalits have become less prevalent. Education, awareness, and modernization are effective approaches for addressing Dalit issues with equality. Efforts have been made to raise awareness among Dalits about their rights and responsibilities through legal literacy programs. This has resulted in increased education among Dalit youth and initiatives to include them in administrative and political roles, bringing them into the national mainstream.

The Constitution of Nepal 2072 plays a significant role in eliminating the caste system and punishing those who engage in caste discrimination in public places and access to public services. Dalits now have increased participation in governance at both national and local levels due to specific reservation policies. These efforts aim to reduce discrimination in socio-economic and political spheres. Overall, reduced caste-based discrimination has led to fairer and more justice-based relations between Dalits and non-Dalits.

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