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RELATIONS BETWEEN CASTE AND NOMADIC COMMUNITIES: AN ECONOMICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction:

Peripatetic or commercial nomadic communities eke out their end means by providing services to various castes in the villages. In the traditional as well as present situation, caste multiplicity with its unique characters permitting certain peripatetic communities to come and perform their services in the villages. It not only permitting them for carrying out services in the villages but guarantying the unwritten assurance of food supply and monetary support. Based on this guaranteed sustenance and assurance many peripatetic became dependent on village caste system. The fulfillment of the basic necessities and material prerequisite of peripatetic communities was always a responsibility of Indian caste system. In the scholarly review caste is always a unit of production which was connected with a particular occupational group, and its diversity in various occupational groups for that matter caste has created agrarian economic model. Various unique features of the Indian caste system can be understood in various scholarly writings in this article.

Keywords: Caste, Peripatetic Community, Customers, Occupation

Caste and Jati

Before going understand the relations between caste and nomadic communities the mere concept of caste, Varna system needs to understood, according to Dumont (1970) in the Varna at the highest level Bramhin (priest), then Shatriyas (Solders), and Vaishyas (traders), were considered as Dwija or twice borne¹, at the lower-level Shudras or low castes also known as Dalits or outcastes who were considered as untouchable. There are many social science scientists have also believed on the status of the caste-based hierarchy. For Dumont hierarchy in the caste system is a state of mind and members in the caste system ready accept it. Caste was always connected with occupation and this custom was based on purity and pollution principal. However, caste is considered impure depending upon the Brahmanical hierarchy (Gupta 2005). Dumont has argued that a clean hierarchy allows for economics and politics only surreptitiously, but only in the interstitial levels (Dumont 1988 197), otherwise the hierarchy stands firm as its two poles stand in opposition to each other. At one extreme of this hierarchy is the Brahman (or most pure), and at the other stands the untouchables (who are positively polluting) (Gupta 2005:410). On the other hand, Senart argued that castes should be seen as units, and one should not hurry into arranging them into hierarchy (Cited in Gupta 2005).

Pertaining to caste status Dipankar Gupta (2005) opined that “if traditional scholarship on the caste were to be accepted, then even those, who were considered lower impure in the ritual order, would consider their position to be just and benefiting their status in terms of the hierarchy of purity and pollution” (Gupta 2005:411). Caste is identified as Jati. People often use the term Jati to define their particular group at the same time the term gaon (gram, village) is also used. A village consists of many Jatis some of which have hereditary relations of interdependence, for which the term used after Wisner (1936) is Jajmani (or patron-clients) system. By Jati is meant a community of people whose membership is acquired by birth and is theoretically unalterable, who share a common name, the similar story (or myth) of origin, are expected to hold expertise on and perform a specific occupation or more than one occupation, marry within their community, have face to face relations their co-members, who eat together, and have their own council where matters and disputes pertaining to their groups are discussed ad resolved (Srivastava 2016).

It is pertinent to note that “Each Jati is cultural whole: has its own words and marks of intonation in a common shared dialect; its culinary characteristics; own style of dress and preference for a particular type of cloth; distinct homestead, interns of its architectural design, use of space, the kind and number of utensils and the other material cultural objects” (Cited in Srivastava 2016). Caste is a “closed system”, almost immutable, in reality it has allowed both upward and



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downward mobility (Srivastava 2016). However as far as the religion is concern Srivastava (2016) discussed the existence of castes in various religions, primarily Hindu religion have numerous castes whereas caste has also been found among non-Hindu for instance Muslim, Christian, Budhist, Jain, Sikh, Jew and Zorostrian Jatis (Cited in Srivastava 2016). According to Wiser (1936) “A social organizations such as the Hindu caste system, which gives each occupational group a fixed standing within the community, must have of necessity have certain patterns of behaviour which enable each caste to maintain its own status and satisfactorily engage in relationships with others. Among these behaviour patterns are marriage, social intercourse in matters of eating, drinking, smoking, conventions of untouchability and inapproachability, and service (Jajmani) relationships (1986:430 Cited in Gould).

Occupational Ranking and Marginality:

Bataillon and other have noted that social marginality is expressed in a number of ways, the most common being restriction on inter marriage, restrictions on commensality, restrictions on prolonged physical proximity, etc. With this kind of restrictions and local minority status, marginality also contributes to their overwhelming political weakness, as the same is observed with peripatetic communities (Rao 1987). Rao also noted that “ in many societies the moral or religious ideologies of the customers result in certain professions being despised, even though frequently, these professions are extremely important” (1987:8-9). In accordance with marginality David Nemeth cites examples from Islam that it categorically disapproves professional musicians, leather workers, etc., (Nemeth 1987). Rao noted that in Brahmanic India all crafts were generally considered as polluting and the occupations of many non-pastoral nomadic communities in India were and still are considered unclean, and they themselves are often of low caste.

Rao also noted that, “As a complement to their social and political marginality non-pastoral nomadic communities are often ascribed certain neutrality in their dealings with customers” (Rao 1987:7-10). It was also reported that if nomadic community has to earn a livelihood, then they cannot have disputes openly with village power holders (Berland 2003). There are certain debates on the relations between non-pastoral nomadic communities and sedentary society that argue that settled people do not like nomads and do not trust them (Rao and Casimir 2003). Hayden’s (1987) study on Peripatetic Nandiwalla in Maharashtra reported that after increase in pig sacrifice for Ram Mamma ritual led to low status and prestige of Nandiwalla among village society. Consequently, Nadiwalla were boycotted from accessing village well water.

Specialization in Occupation a Demand by Caste:

Pertaining to economic identity there are different theories that give directions towards how a certain group became nomad. Fuchs (1969) has suggested that, it was the specialization demanded by the caste system that forced certain groups to turn into nomadic way of life, whereas Misra (1969) observed that in Karnataka each Peripatetic group specialized in some activity which also acted as identity marker for the group (cited in Rao and Casimir 2003). There are certain arguments pertaining to how the status of nomadic community is determined. Fisher has argued that the degree of economic periphery decides the caste status of a nomadic community, and not vice versa. However, Rao and Casimir (2003) has stated that the existence of peripatetic professions existed for centuries and we can find it in the sources, such as royal chronicles and literary works, etc. They also emphasize on the need for much more anthropological and historical research. On the other hand, in case of socio-economic interaction, which continued over the centuries between various types of nomads and sedentary groups, Rao and Casimir (2003) have noted that some of this is documented in oral history. They give example of peripatetic Bhopa who sing the exploits of Pabuji, the Rathor Rajput hero, who is credited with introducing a certain camel-breed in Marwar. Interestingly, when we geographically differentiate the non-pastoral nomadic communities, there is difference in the nature of communities, for instance, in India where people owning bears are often of a different caste from people with monkeys, actors, or magicians. But Berland observed in Pakistan that they are all of one Qaum¹- Qalander (Berland 2003:104-124). It means that under the same premises of peripatetic there may be different specializations.

¹ According to Joseph C. Berland (1987) Qaum refers to a “people” or in a broader sense it may specify a nation or tribe.



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There are two studies undertaken in Pakistan by Berland, one on Kanjar and another on Qalandar. The study on Kanjar observed that, “Kanjar gain their livelihood and derive their identity among other groups of nomadic artisans and entertainers from their skills and manufacturers of terracotta toys, papier mache horses and paper flowers” (Berland 1987). In the study of Qalandar community in Pakistan, Berland observed some important features of peripatetic community, such as endogamy, separateness, social mobility, moveable possessions and communities innovative economic strategies, flexible structures, fluid levels of social organization and community values, which are essential elements among the nomads of south waste Asia. He also noted that the loss of mobility, freedom, and honour of peripatetic Qalandar are major sources of shame, dishonor, loss of respect, wellbeing and, ultimately loss of individual, group, community, and even identity of a people (Berland 2003). Berland’s study shows that mobility plays a vital role amongst nomadic community in building and sustaining community bonding and togetherness.

Nomadic Communities Customer Base:

Peripatetic nomads derive most of their subsistence from settled communities (Rao 1987). This also results in dependency of sedentary communities on peripatetics for their needs. In social relations, the significant role is played by frequency and regularity of interaction, very seldom have nomads lived in isolation and enjoyed autonomous economic system (Rao and Casimir 2003). The nature of non-pastoral nomadic communities’ traditional livelihood is of different forms, such as food exchanges, trade, transport services, wars, raiding, slavery, hunting, and large spheres of entertainment. These are socio economic spaces in which regular interaction was taking place between nomadic and sedentary groups (Rao and Casimir 2003). In a study on the Nandiwalla it was observed that they are primarily entertainers who provide entertainment to the sedentary community. The special features of their livelihood are that they have trained bulls and they go place to place, perform such tricks with the bulls as acrobats or fortune tellers and receive money as subsistence (Hayden 1987). In the study on the Humly Khyampa of Nepal it was observed that they perform different tactics to attract new customers. The Khyampa households used to offer villagers a goat to be killed for feasting where the participants in the feast will become customers (Schweizer 2003).

There are different observations with regard to relations pertaining to caste system and nomadism. Rao and Casimir (2003) cite an example on types of peripatetics they observed that in Andhra Pradesh there were twenty three different peripatetic groups visiting a village in Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh which could be classified into two groups – those who offered their goods and services to all the villagers, irrespective of caste, and those who served only specific caste. In another study it was observed that nomads probably do not often have proper Jajmani attachments with villagers, but they do maintain close relations with particular villages which may be seen as an analogous relationship (Hayden 1987). Rao and Casimir (2003) have observed that peripatetics survive through economic interaction with the other communities, like the forest tribes who were systematically linked with the outer world through barter relations with peripatetic traders, such as the Banjara.

Conclusion and Discussion:

It is found that nomadic communities have direct relations with caste in the villages. In fact, nomadic communities have provided their services to the village caste groups and found their livelihood. There are certain areas which need serious scholarly attention such as in changing global situation what are the relations between caste and nomadic communities. After the change is witnessed, nomadic communities have an option of getting settle and have to find new economic opportunities. In fact, it is becoming a challenge for their survival to see new occupational opportunities. Their age-old occupational requirement of staying in one place for few days and again moving to other place for searching end means is not in practice now. On the other had it is important to see the villagers and nomadic communities’ relations in present situation.

At the same time, it is pertinent to note that there is huge migration happening from rural to cities in this situation it is important to see whether nomadic communities are also migrating to the cities and staying besides caste groups which was their traditional customer base.



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ⁱ Twice born have a right to wear a sacred thread across their shoulders following a ceremony and become "reborn" ritual is performed by Bramhin based on scriptural guidance. But shudra's and others had no privilege for this ritual.