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Dynamics of Caste in Marriage: A Study of Select Indian Nepali Dalit Short Stories

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Abstract:

This paper critically analyses the select Indian Nepali Dalit short stories *Yadi* (2006) by I.K. Singh, *Andhabiswako Parkhal* (2019) by Radha Rasaily and *Panditko Bihey* (2020) by Ashok Roka that elucidates the dynamics surrounding inter-caste marriage within the Nepali society. The narratives investigate the deep-rooted caste system and the pervasive caste hierarchy embedded within the Nepali community. The Nepali community enforces strict prohibitions against inter-caste marriages and promotes endogamy to uphold the caste hierarchy. The violation of endogamy leads to the ostracism of the couples from both their familial and societal spheres, necessitating the performance of death rituals aimed at purifying themselves of the societal shame inflicted by their offspring's unions with individuals of a lower caste. This paper explores the diverse forms of marriage practices prevalent within the Nepali society, encompassing elopement, capture marriage, forced marriage and arranged marriage along with the distinct conventions that govern each of these marriages.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, Endogamy, Inter-caste marriage, Indian Nepali Literature.

Introduction

In the Nepali community, the institution of marriage has experienced considerable changes in contemporary years, shaped by various sociocultural, economic and political factors. The evolution of marriage custom raises critical queries regarding the intricacies of interpersonal relationships, cultural paradigms and societal transformations within the Nepali community. Marriage and other forms of relationship between two individuals are supposed to be an intimate affair, but political and religious intervention disrupts the sacredness of this institution. In the Indian society the power dynamics surrounding the institution of marriage are always determined by ideas of race, class, caste gender and community. Robert H. Lowie (1932), an Austrian-American anthropologist, describes marriage as “a permanent bond between the mates and shares biological, economic, and social functions including education” (462) while, Arnold van Gennep (1960), French ethnographer and folklorist says that, “marriage is the incorporation of a stranger into a group. Universally, it is regarded as a union between a man and woman and grants them socially approved status as husband and wife” (3). George Peter Murdock (1994), an American anthropologist, asserts that “Sexual unions without economic cooperation are common, and there are relationships between men and women involving a division of labour without sexual gratification, but marriage exists only when the economic and the sexual gratification are united in one relationship, and this combination occurs only in marriage” (8).

In the Indian culture, marriage is a lifelong commitment. In a stereotypical Indian household, the married woman typically serves as the homemaker, attending to the emotional and social needs of the family, whereas the man usually provides financial support. In nearly all recognized cultures of India, contingent upon the religious background of the partners, an array of rituals is conducted as an integral component of the marriage ceremony. In numerous regions of India, the common practice of arranged marriage constitutes the principal methodology for

the family of the man and woman to identify a suitable partner for their children, and are expected to cultivate affection for each other and the extended family members (Dube).

This paper delves into the various ideologies that are inherent barriers to inter-caste unions in the Indian Nepali culture. The most important aspect of the Hindu caste system is the practice of endogamy (marriage within the same caste/clan/tribe). It is apparent throughout history that the upper caste men have been permitted to engage in exogamy (marriage with different caste/clan/tribe) and polygamy (marriage with more than one individual). On the one hand, Hindu scriptures stipulate that a Brahmin or an upper-caste male may engage in casual sexual relations with women from lower castes; however, bestowing upon them the status of wife is deemed offensive due to the “impure” caste and gender status attributed to the lower caste women (Rege). On the other hand, an upper caste/Brahmin woman is restricted to marriage with her caste to protect her sanctity, thereby becoming ensnared in the notion of *Pativrata Dharma* (wifely duties). B.R. Ambedkar, in his book *Riddles of Rama and Krishna* (1987), critiques the private lives of the Hindu gods Rama and Krishna and demonstrates how caste and gender politics affected the private lives of Krishna, who married eight women, most of who belonged to the Kshatriya caste, while the lower caste Yadava women remained relegated to the status of concubines and were rendered sexually available showing us the prevalence of the caste system since time immemorial.

Caste segregation in the Nepali Community

According to the National Human Rights Commission of India, the term “Dalit” is derived from the Sanskrit word “dal”, which means to tread on, to shatter and to suppress. In the 1960s, the word “Dalit” was first used in India in reference to the Simon Commission’s Report (1927), written by B.R. Ambedkar. The term referred to the group of people who were economically, culturally, religiously, socially and politically oppressed. In Nepali terminology “Dalit” is a

politically created term and are referred to those individuals who are lower than the elites in terms of caste and class. Nepali Dalits have continued to work under the direction of members belonging to the upper caste and class in India as well as the neighbouring country Nepal who share a similar socio cultural and linguistic background.

While examining the Nepali communities residing in India, the caste system and the caste-based marginalization of the Dalits can be traced back to the Hindu doctrine, which is further corroborated by the caste code of Nepal known as the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 (a codified legal framework). The system is structured into a five-tier hierarchical classification, which includes *Tagadhari* (the superior caste that is entitled to wear the sacred thread), Non-enslavable and Enslavable Matwali /alcohol consumers, impure but touchable and impure and untouchable. However, in the regions of North Bengal, the Nepalis are divided into three castes: Tagadhari (upper caste), Matwali (middle class) and untouchables (lower castes). In the Nepali community kami, damai and sarki fall under the category of the untouchables and was believed that the water touched by them cannot be taken by the other caste members.

The kami, damai and sarki castes were traditionally engaged in the professions as blacksmiths, tailors and cobblers respectively. The Damai community garnered recognition for its proficiency playing various musical instruments and actively participated in the musical arts. Historically, the Damai community was involved in tailoring while also serving as folk musicians. They were known for performing folk melodies called *Naumati Baja* or *Damai Baja*, which encompasses nine distinct types of musical instruments during matrimonial ceremonies. The kami community, recognized for its expertise as blacksmiths was responsible for fabricating essential tools utilized in agricultural or construction purposes while Sunars operated as goldsmiths (Singh). It is ironical that even with the Nepali Dalit community caste segregation is practiced where the Damais assert their equality with the Kami community while

positioning themselves as superior to the Sarki caste. The Nepali Dalits have consistently been recognized for their intricate artisan capabilities; however, the prevalent socio-economic marginalization has led to the younger generation distancing themselves from their ancestral crafts. The ostracization associated with their identity has compelled individuals to renounce their traditional art form to pursue white-collar occupations.

Discussion

Marriage through elopement is perceived as a contemporary cultural phenomenon, and within the various Nepali communities of Nepal and India, the selection of a spouse via elopement has been a historically entrenched practice (Naz). In some areas of India, couples who elope usually encounter the oppressive actions of their relatives, such as honour killings, which are frequently highlighted through media coverage. Frequently, couples engaging in inter-caste, inter-community and inter-religious relationships perceive that their partners will not be accepted by their family members, leading them to the conclusion that fleeing from home is the sole viable option available to them (Chowdhry). Acceptance of a lower caste individual is still not guaranteed after marriage.

In the context of Nepali society, the subjection of both physical and psychological abuse is directed towards the daughter-in-law remains prevalent, as exemplified in the case of Meghna Darjee, married to Pammey Pradhan, an upper caste man, who was not allowed to see and touch her dead husband's body as she belonged to the Damai community. This incident took place in 2021 after which The AINSCA (All India Nepali Scheduled Caste Association) registered a case against the husband's family for practicing such caste discrimination. Similarly, another such incident has been of Robin Thapa from Kalimpong, who was boycotted by the village members for marrying Deepa Ghatani who belonged to the Dalit community. The family of Robin Thapa performed his *kriya* (death rituals) as he married a girl from a low caste. He was

not allowed to perform the last rites of his father who died on 2017. The BKUP (Bharatiya Kami Unnayan Parishad) sought constitutional provisions to seek justice for Deepa Ghatani and her family members.

Pankaj Dhungel, a journalist from Sikkim, in his news article “Sikkim: Is caste-based violence against Dalits on the rise?” (2021), elucidated the tensions rooted in caste hierarchies within Rishi village, Sikkim, which arose as a consequence of a hypergamous marriage between a male of the Bhujel caste and a female of the Damai caste. When their father/father-in-law died, the four other sons were permitted to execute the last rites, while the son and the daughter-in-law of the hypergamous marriage faced exclusion. This exclusion exemplifies the enduring influence of caste-based traditions within ritualistic practices.

Since literature is the mirror of society, such caste-based atrocities in case of inter-caste marriages can be seen in Indian Nepali literature through stories like *Yadi* (If; 2006) by I.K. Singh, *Andhabiswas ko Parkhal* (The Wall of Superstition; 2019) by Radha Rasaily and *Panditko Bihey* (Brahmin’s marriage; 2020) by Ashok Roka. *Andhabiswas ko Parkhal* highlights the complexities of inter-caste relationships where the fear of unacceptability leads to the elopement of the central characters. The story delves deep into the practice of caste discrimination, which is still entrenched in the minds of individuals in the contemporary world. Inter-caste marriage in the Nepali community has severe implications on the lives of the people who tie the knot without the consent of their family members. It is a common practice for the family of the upper caste members to perform *kriya* (death rituals) of the upper caste male/female who marries into a lower caste family. This is observed in the case of Anurag who hails from an upper caste family and Radhika who belongs to the lower caste family. When Anurag elopes with Radhika, his parents perform *kriya* for him to purify themselves from the

“impurity” (Radhika’s caste) that had been associated with the family name and to gain acceptance from the upper caste community.

In the historical context of the Nepali community, various methods of securing marital partners were widely practised, including marriage through negotiation, marriage by elopement, marriage by capture and marriage by service. However, the most commonly observed customary practices have been arranged marriages and marriage by elopement, also referred to as the *Bhagawney pratha* or *Chori biya* in Nepali. The practice of marriage by capture, though not explicitly practiced in the contemporary society, is seen in the short story *Panditko Bihey* by Ashok Roka where Shyamnath Parajuly Pandit acquired the possession of his second wife (Dhakal’s daughter) through marriage by capture. Ashok Roka vividly describes the process of capturing the woman whom the man intends to marry:

Bhoko baghle shikar jhamtiyehai Panditle hilaisariko Dhakal ki chori ko pakhurama sanaso le pakriye jhai tandai, ghiseudai gharbhitra huley. Ekchan ta aru ropa haru bausey harule kuro ko gathi bujhnai sakena. Aru ropaharu daarle ra sharamle hilaisari ghartira lagey. Dhakal ki choriko charko virodh ko awaz pani shanta hudai goyo. (Like a hungry tiger hunting for its prey, the Pandit held Dhakal’s daughter by her calves and dragged her with ease into his house. The other farmers could not understand the knot of the matter. Later, when they understood, they went home shuddering in fear and shame. Dhakal’s daughter crying aloud in protest also became quiet after a while). (118)

The hypocrisy of the caste system is brought into light when Dhakal has no objection to the marriage as his daughter is chosen by an *Upadhyay Bahun* (purohit Brahmin), showing us how marriage to an upper caste is always acceptable even if the means of marriage are elopement or capture of the daughter. The story also portrays the subjugation of women in a patriarchal society where she is deprived of all choices concerning her life and has to compromise on

matters of her marital partner as well. Based on such exploitation of women, the legitimacy of marriage as an institution can be seriously questioned.

The various practices involved with marriage by elopement are elucidated by Min Liwang (2000), who talks about rituals such as *Chor ko sor* (where the boy's family persuade the girl's family through customary offerings) and *Sindoor Potey*, which is the custom of officiating the marriage by a priest followed by the *Dhog bhet* during which the family of the boy and girl are ceremonially introduced to each other. Such complex rituals associated with elopement is portrayed in the story *Yadi* where I.K. Singh illustrates the intricacies associated with inter-caste marriage specially when the girl belongs to the upper caste and the boy to the lower caste. *Yadi* is not just a love story between Gayatri and Sanjay, who have to face the harsh realities of inter-caste marriage; it is also a story about Bhimchandra (Gayatri's father) and Indrawati (Sanjay's mother) who once in their life were in love with each other but due to the rigid caste system during their time could not gather the courage to stand up against their family and society.

Inter-caste marriage constitutes a pivotal theme within Dalit literature as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who, in his address at Mahad, elucidated that practices of inter-dining and inter-caste marriages could serve as mechanisms for the eradication of the caste system. He says:

If we want to remove untouchability in the home as well as outside, we must break down the prohibition against intermarriage. Nothing else will serve. From another point of view, we see that breaking down the bar against intermarriage is the way to establish real equality. Anyone must confess that when the root division is dissolved, incidental points of separateness will disappear by themselves. (230)

The repudiation of the caste system constitutes the fundamental foundation upon which Ambedkar's philosophy of Exogamy is established; however, ever inter-caste unions involving

Dalits may not effectively address the issue of caste-based atrocities that are inflicted upon Dalits within the Indian societal framework.

Inter-caste unions between castes or sub-castes that are not significantly different in terms of the social hierarchy are deemed acceptable; moreover, in instances where the social disparity between a male and a female is excessively pronounced to facilitate a formal marital arrangement, there exists a customary allowance for the formation of a lasting sexual partnership that carries specific, though not all, connotations of matrimony. Consequently, an individual belonging to a high caste may live with a female from a substantially lower caste without forfeiting his personal elevated status, provided that he refrains from consuming ritually significant food that has been prepared by her (Haimendorf).

In this context, Ashok Roka not only exposes the harsh means of acquiring a woman for marriage but he also shows us the condition of women after marriage who is compelled to abide by the rules of the society. Shyamnath Parajuly had not formalized his marriage with his second wife through a religious ceremony. After fathering four children with her, he ultimately seeks to sanctify the marriage in order to be able to consume the food prepared by her. Even though Dhakal's daughter was born into a caste that is merely one tier subordinate to that of Shyamnath, she was prohibited from entering the kitchen. She expresses her indignation regarding the purpose behind their delayed marriage. She ultimately articulates her discontent by challenging the entrenched norms of the caste-based society that Shyamnath adheres to rigidly. She says:

Sangai sutda huney, goda mildo huney. Char-char chora-choriko babu chai huney.

Miley tayar pareko bhansa chai nachalney? (Its ok to sleep together, its ok to be the father of four kids but it is not ok to consume the food prepared by me?) (116)

In *Dynamics of a Hill Society: Nepalis in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas* (1989), T.B. Subba highlights the rigid nature of the customs and traditions followed by the Brahmins of the Nepali community, as depicted in the story. He explains that the *Bahun*s (Brahmins) hold the highest position in the social hierarchy and maintain their social, religious and spiritual practices. Inter-caste marriage is seldom allowed between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas (referred to as the twice-born castes) and was traditionally not even allowed to interact with the members of the lower castes.

Endogamy, according to B.R. Ambedkar is the core of the caste system and the first step towards eradicating it is inter-caste marriage. Although the practice of caste discrimination is decreasing through consciousness generated by various social reform movements, the violation of endogamous marriage often leads to the victimisation of the couples who have to face the harsh punishment imposed by their families and the society. Even though the Nepali society does not practice crude forms of punishment like honour killing, performing the last rites of the boy/girl marrying someone of the lower caste, out casting the couple from the society and prohibition from entering the kitchen are still practiced as has been intricately portrayed in the select texts.

M.P. Lama in *Sikkim: Society, Polity, Economy, Environment* (1994) also highlights the rigid caste system in the Nepali community and the consequences of inter caste marriage which compels couples to choose the path of elopement for the fear of being rejected by their families. Among the Nepali population residing in Sikkim and Darjeeling, the concepts of *jat* (caste) and *thar* (clan) assume a significant role in the institution of marriage. Each *jat* encompasses a variety of different *thars*. Clans are defined as a collective of selected kinship groups established by lineage (Jha). Every clan is comprised of numerous sub-clans or lineages.

Marital unions are predominantly favoured within the confines of the endogamous caste, while exogamous clans are also considered.

Conclusion

Inter-caste marriages have persistently been a source of social discord, periodically culminating in conflict. This phenomenon can be attributed to the perception that marriage among Hindus constitutes the union of families, thus regarded as a social institution rather than a private affair. Concepts such as desire, love and individual choice are frequently deemed unacceptable within the confines of marriage, as it is viewed as a social contract. In contrast, inter-caste marriage is interpreted as a union between two individuals that transgresses the foundational principles of marriage. Furthermore, it is posited that marriages within the Hindu community serve to perpetuate a shared ancestral lineage; however, the occurrence of inter-caste marriage undermines this paradigm. Our society can be characterized as patriarchal, with patriarchal influences permeating all realms, including the preservation of caste integrity, social status, power dynamics and hierarchical structures. Writers like Ashok Roka, Radha Rasaily and I.K. Singh emerge as agents to expose the intricacies of inter-caste marriages in the Nepali community and the subjugation of the lower castes even in the 21st century. Despite the formation of several organizations to eliminate caste-based segregation in the Nepali community, cases like that of Meghna Darjee and Robin Thapa prove the prevalence of caste discrimination and opposition to inter-caste marriages.

It is widely perceived that inter-caste marriages pose a significant challenge to male hegemony and call into question the traditionally sanctioned authority that pervades families, kinships, castes and communities. Consequently, there exists formidable opposition to inter-caste marriages among Hindus in India. Marital relationships are anticipated to confer strength and recognition upon the caste group, both socially and within the political-economic landscape.

Any transgression or disruption of established matrimonial patterns leads to alterations and upheaval within families, clans and entire caste communities. However, the Hindu Marriage Validity Act (1949) endorses inter-caste marriages, persistent resistance and conflict continue to arise between legal frameworks and customary practices, as well as between traditional beliefs and contemporary social realities, ultimately reinforcing the assertion of caste within society.

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