

economic relationships between occupational castes and high castes in central nepal

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The facts here presented were gathered in Kattike Deurali gaon panchayat (Kabhre Palanchok district). This panchayat lies between the Sun Kosi and one of its affluents, the Chauri Khola: it consists of two small valleys which rise, one perpendicular to the Sun Kosi and the other to the Chauri Khola, meeting at the Deurali col, the geographic and administrative centre of the gaon panchayat.

This administrative unit includes various villages, which are situated mostly half way up the southern slopes of the valley. The fields are terraced from the valley floor up to the houses and the steep stony hilltops are left as grazing for the animals. The economy of this area is almost solely agricultural: the cultivation of rice, maize, wheat, buckwheat and millet. Buffalo and oxen are reared in cattle-sheds, but sheep and goats are herded by children in the nearby pastures.

Although Kabhre Palanchok district has a high proportion of Tamangs, Kattike Deurali, with the exception of two Newar families, is populated only by the following Nepalese castes: Jaisi Bahun, Chetri, Giri, Kami, Sarki and Damai. It is the last three castes, grouped under the heading of occupational castes which are of particular interest here. The other castes will only be considered in terms of their relationship with these occupational castes.

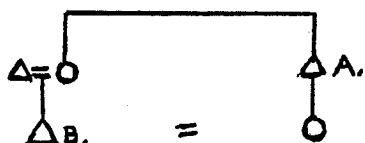


A Sarki making the sole of a shoe.

The Kami (blacksmiths), the Sarki (tanners and cobblers) and the Damai (tailors and musicians) belong to the group of castes from whom one may not accept water (pani nachalne); purification by the sprinkling of water (chhoe chhito halnu parne) is needed after contact with them. This means that they are amongst the lowest castes in the hierarchy as established by Jang Bahadur Rana in 1853. But this is not to say that these three castes, though equally untouchable as far as the high castes are concerned, place themselves on an equal footing: a Damai will accept water from a Kami or a Sarki, but they will not accept it from him. The Damai are considered as inferior to the Kami and the Sarki. The latter consider each other in the same way: neither will accept water from the other. If the status of a Kami or a Sarki is, therefore slightly higher than that of a Damai, from the point of view of the high castes all three share the same impurity. On the practical level of daily relationships, this impurity makes them untouchables for the high castes who must:

- accept from them neither water nor food (the reprisal being exclusion from their own caste), and avoid even touching them (otherwise purification from this contact, by the sprinkling of water, is necessary). For example a high caste man wishing to give a cigarette to an untouchable would throw it into his hand.
- purify that which, because of the nature of their work, has been in contact with an untouchable. For example, the garment made by a tailor must be purified with a few drops of water before being worn.
- not enter a craftsman's house and the craftsman must not enter the house of a high caste man. When the Damai work for an employer, they sit in the porch or the courtyard and they are given their food outside the house. In the same way, when the musicians play during domestic rituals, they stay outside the house.
- Sexual relations between high castes and castes contact with whom requires purification are strictly forbidden. Even though, since 1963 infringement of this rule is not punishable by law, in practice it is still an unacceptable situation.

- As a result of their impurity, no Brahmans officiate as priests at the festivals or life cycle rituals of the untouchables. The priest's role is taken by the son-in-law, or the sister's son (which can come to the same thing in the occupational castes, contrary to the high castes, as marriage with a matrilineal cross cousin is allowed).



B is both son-in-law of A
and son of his sister

- The inferior status of the occupational castes is evident in the village's topography; they usually live on the outskirts of the main settlement. In Kattike they are either below or above the centre on the poorest land.

In Kattike gaon panchayat, they are distributed as follows:

- There are only a few Kami. They live in a little hamlet of six houses situated on a steep slope, a little way up from Kattike Gaon (one of the two main settlements of the panchayat, in 1972 there were 833 inhabitants, in the second one, Jyamire, further east, there were 863 inhabitants). All these Kami belong to the same lineage and their clan name is Kaligar.
- The Sarki: they are grouped in a hamlet of eleven houses, called Bokechaur. This hamlet is situated on the northern slope of the valley, above the Deurali pass, on particularly arid land. They are all of the same lineage and their clan name is Gore.
- The Damai are the most numerous: they live in two hamlets, one above Kattike Gaon is composed of about ten houses and the other, on the upper limit of Jyamire, of thirty houses.

The occupational castes live in the standard hill house of the Nepalese: a rectangular, one storey (the hearth is on the ground floor) house with stone walls and a thatched roof. However, they differ from high caste houses in that the outer walls are not

plastered, the stones are visible. The houses have a small porch and a courtyard where most of the agricultural and occupational activities take place. Only the Kami have a special building, a forge, for their work (there are two forges for the six Kami houses). Often there are cattle-sheds near the houses and vegetable gardens and bari (fields under dry cultivation) where people grow buckwheat, millet, maize and some mustard. In Kattike, like in other parts of Nepal, the untouchables usually have little land and very rarely rice-fields. Their basic food is buckwheat gruel or millet rather than rice.

However, farming is not their main activity: the greater part of their income comes from their work as skilled artisans. Nevertheless, in Kattike the three castes work at their traditional crafts but their economic situation is not the same: the Sarki are paid for each item in cash whereas the Damai and Kami have the traditional relationship, jajmani, with their employers, that is to say the craftsman's family is bound to the employer's family by a tacit contract which must be renewed every year. The craftsman provides his specialised services in exchange for a part of his employer's crops. This type of relationship shows that the division of labour is linked to the necessary solidarity between castes.

However, contrary to the situation in India, in Nepal this jajmani relationship involves just a small number of services (many of the activities reserved to special castes in India, like washing or shaving, in Nepal can be done by anyone). In Kattike, jajmani applies for the services of the Damai and the Kami and for the local Brahman priests. This contract is also very unstable: it must be renewed every year during the Chaitra Dasain festival (on the eighth day of the clear fortnight of the month of Chait - March-April). The craftsman has to go to his employer's house where he must be given some of the meat prepared for the family feast if the agreement is to be renewed. If he is not offered meat, the contract is broken. The craftsman has thus very few guarantees. On the other hand, a craftsman who thinks that his remuneration is not sufficient can also break off the contract by not going to his employer's house at Chaitra Dasain. The employer usually ensures the craftsman is satisfied in order to avoid being called an avaricious man; high caste women in Kattike always make sure that the people working for them are given big meals.

In this type of relationship, the craftsman calls his employer bista and the employer calls his craftsman bali-kami or bali-damai, which means Kami or Damai working for a share of the crops (bali).

Even though there are not many Kami in Kattike, they are very important in the life of the village: as blacksmiths they make most of the farm implements and also some domestic utensils. Every blacksmith has dealings with several bista (in Kattike, between twenty and a hundred) for whom he is working.

What is the work of a blacksmith? On the one hand, he has to repair all the metal tools and containers for his bista: it usually consists of reshaping and sharpening blunt edges or mending dented or holed copper jars. On the other hand, he makes new tools: blades for sickles, hoes and axes, ploughshares, frying pans, Chulesi (knife made of a verticle blade standing on a metal base). In Kattike, the blacksmith only forges iron, which he buys from the nearest bazaar at Dolaghat. He does not make anything new in brass or copper (people buy these in the bazaar). For any new thing he makes, the blacksmith receives a special payment, puhunki, either in kind (a few mana of cereals) or, which is more usual in Kattike, in cash (one to three rupees for a sickle blade, ten to twelve for a hoe). He does not receive any payment for doing repairs as it is the normal service he must give to his bista.

The exact amount of the bali varies according to the importance and wealth of the family of each bista. It is given at the time of every main harvest, in Bhadau (August-September) for maize, in Mansir (November-December) for rice, in Chait (March-April) for wheat. Usually a rich bista gives his Kami:

1 basket (doko) of maize cobs (6-7 kg)

10 pathi of paddy (25 kg)

1 pathi of wheat (3-4 kg)

And for certain festivals the craftsman receives a portion of food (bhag) which corresponds to one meal which he could have at his bista's house. The bhag at Dasai is the most important as, on the tenth day,

Dasami, the Kami receives the following from his employer:

2 mana of husked rice (850 gr)

2 mana of chiura (flaked rice) (500 gr)

4 pau of meat (800 gr). The Kami are traditionally given the neck of the kids slaughtered by the bista's family on the eighth day of the festival (the Kami, like the Damai, sacrifice a pig for Dasain, on the ninth day).

It has been noted earlier that at Chaitya Dasain, for the renewal of their contract, the Kami (and the Damai) receive some meat from their bista. Finally, at domestic festivals and the life cycle rituals in the bista's house, he gives some food to his craftsmen.

The Damai have a double function, so they are in contact with the higher castes in two ways. As musicians they are hired for special occasions and paid in cash, as tailors they work, like the Kami, for a bista, on a contractual basis. But, unlike the Kami, generally the whole Damai family come and work at the bista's house. They bring their sewing machine with them and sit in the courtyard, one of them cutting the material, the others sewing it either by machine or by hand.



A Damai band in a marriage procession.

Every Damai family from Kattike works for twenty to forty bista belonging to Jaisi Bahun, Giri and Chetri castes. They spend four or five days each year in every house, mending old clothes (only the Damai sew, indeed, women of other castes never even do any mending) or making new ones. In this case the material is provided by the bista (who has bought it in the bazaar) and any remnants are given to the Damai. For cutting, the tailor copies an old garment and there are rarely any fittings. He makes mostly women's blouses, men's and children's trousers and shirts, and quilts (sirak) for which the cotton is brought from Kathmandu. New clothes are made mostly for festivals or life-cycle rituals, especially for marriages. The Damai arrives one or two days before the ceremony at the girl's or boy's home to sew new clothes for the whole family, notably the beige shirt and trousers for the bridegroom and the full set of red garments for the bride (for the marriage, the girl has to wear red clothes which are brought by the boy).

Like the Kami, the Damai receives a share of his bista's main crops in payment for his work:

1 basket (doko) of maize (6-7 kg)

from 10 pathi to 1 muri of paddy (from 25 to 50 kg)

1 pathi of wheat (3.1 kg)

1 pathi of millet (3,822 kg). The harvest is in mansir (November-December)

1 pathi of buckwheat, equally in mansir.

When the Damai work at their employer's houses, they have to be given meals, they also receive a portion of food (bhag) for the most important festivals and domestic rituals. At Dasai they receive:

1 pathi of husked rice (3,598 kg)

2 mana of chiura (500 gr)

and the tails of the animals which have been sacrificed.

The Damai (only the men) are also needed as musicians by the high castes. The presence of a band is necessary for some of the life-cycle ceremonies, like annaprasan (eating of the first solid food) and marriage, and for some festivals like Kartik ekadasi (11th day of

the clear fortnight of the October-November month) when people worship Vishnu as tulsi (basil). The musical instruments played by the Damai in Kattike are: karnal (long straight metal trumpet), sahanai (curved oboe), damaha (large kettledrum), tyamko (small kettledrum), cymbals (jhyamta) and dholak (a two-headed drum). A marriage-band, for example includes five to eleven musicians. They to escort the bridegroom to the bride's house, play during the ceremony itself, especially during the sidur halne ritual when the bridegroom puts some vermilion (sindur) on the parting of the bride's hair, and also take part in the procession which, the next day, takes the bride back to her husband's village.

Generally the band is chosen and conducted by a Damai who is the regular tailor of the bride's or bridegroom's house. Every musician receives meals and a payment of about five rupees, and, for a marriage, the chief Damai also gets a turban.

The Sarki, contrary to the Damai and the Kami, do not have in Kattike a contractual relationship with a bista: they have only one type of occupational activity, the making of leather shoes, for which they are paid in cash. Their prospective clients come to see them, order a pair of shoes for which they pay between ten and twelve rupees, and return to collect them a few days later.

In Kattike the Sarki form a quite separate hamlet which is located a little above the Deurali pass. They work at home but are in contact with the Kattike villagers as well as with the Tamang of the neighboring panchayat, for, in addition to their function of shoemakers, they sell meat to the Tamang and to the other occupational castes.

High castes do not eat buffalo or beef, so, if their animals die, the Sarki are allowed to buy the carcasses. They pay different amounts for the skins and for the meat:

a buffalo skin costs between 10 and 15 rupees

a cow or ox skin between 3 and 5 rupees

a calf skin between 1 and 3 rupees.

They do not pay anything for the beef as they are the only people who eat it, but they pay between 50 and 200 rupees for buffalo meat, according to the size and condition of the animal. They re-sell this buffalo meat to the other occupational castes and to the Tamang for 5 to 8 rupees a dharni (2.4 kg).

The Sarki only use buffalo skins. The preparation of these skins requires great care and lasts for more than four months.

- first, the whole skin is put in a pit (kharal) for three months, dug near the settlement, and covered with lime, cun (which comes from the banks of the Sun Kosi) to whiten it.
- then, for three weeks, the skin is buried in another pit where crushed fibres of the dhanero tree (Woodfordia fruticosa Kurz) have been soaked; the juice of this plant has the property of tanning the skins.
- later on, the skin is taken out of the pit and sewn in the shape of a waterbottle, then filled up with the same dhanero fibres and hung up on a pole for two or three weeks. It is then unstitched and left to dry, stretched out on the ground with pegs. Finally, the skin is rubbed with oil and beaten to make it soft.

When all this is finished, the skin is ready to be cut and assembled. One buffalo skin of medium size makes about seven pairs of shoes.

The shoemaker uses three types of tools: a cutter (bar), an awl (aro) and a steel mallet (mugro) used to flatten and smooth the leather.

In addition to their professional specialities, the occupational castes are employed by the high castes as agricultural workers at busy times of year: transplanting, harvesting or threshing. They are paid in kind: one pathi of grain for the work done in the irrigated fields (khet), and half that for less hard tasks. Often the men are also employed as porters by the high castes, for instance when they need someone to carry the products they intend to sell in the bazaar. They are paid about 12 rupees a day.

It is interesting to note that in Kattike, out of three occupational activities, two are still regulated by the traditional relationship system. This system is disappearing fast in Nepal and now the economic exchanges are practically made only in cash. The fact that these ties of mutual dependence are being suppressed is not necessarily a good thing for the craftsmen, because it can put an end to their activity. The Sarki of Kattike are a good example. With the lack of a contractual relationship, people tend to disdain the product of the village Sarki and prefer to buy their shoes in the town bazaar where there is more choice and the shoes are more "modern". Craftsmen who can no longer live by their traditional occupations and who have not much land are obliged to look for jobs as agricultural workers or often to migrate to the Terai.

FOOTNOTE

1. This article was translated from the original French by Sarah Duke.

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