

Inclusion-Exclusion Game: The Case of the Kami, Damai and Sarki in Sikkim

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Abstract: *The Kami, Damai and Sarki caste-communities of Sikkim are traditionally viewed as the ‘untouchables’, who find their place in the lowest rungs of the Nepali caste hierarchy. According to The Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Castes Order, 1978, the only Kami, Damai and Sarki who are classified as Scheduled Castes (SCs) are those who practice Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. However, the Kami, Damai and Sarki who follow Christianity or lack a Certificate of Identification (COI) are not included in the aforementioned category and are unable to obtain a Scheduled Caste (SC) certificate. While reservation and protective discrimination are in place to uplift the marginalised communities, such efforts and policies will never fully be efficacious when all the sections of the marginalised are not included in the schedule. One of the key goals of the “Reservation Policy” is upward social mobility, but including some and excluding others leads to a lopsided upliftment. Those sections of Kami, Damai and Sarki who are not a part of the SC category cannot avail the benefits of reservation in education, jobs, etc., therefore, they do not just face the caste exclusion and discrimination but are also administratively deprived. Based on the data drawn from fieldwork in Mellidara-Paiyong GPU South, Sikkim, the present paper attempts to explain the challenges faced by the Kami, Damai and Sarki who are excluded from the SC category and how this administrative exclusion translates in their everyday life. By making use of case studies, the paper seeks to highlight how everyday life experiences and interactions are impacted by inclusion in and exclusion from the Scheduled Caste Category.*

Keywords: Scheduled Caste Category, Sikkim Subject, Certificate of Identification, Inclusion, Exclusion.

Introduction

The Kami, Damai and Sarki caste communities of Sikkim are traditionally viewed as the ‘untouchables’, who find their place in the lowest rungs of the Nepali caste hierarchy. They fall under the broad umbrella term ‘Nepali community’. The Nepali community is a conglomeration of different and distinct tribes and communities. According to Gurung (2011) Nepali community of Sikkim can be divided into the Aryans and the Mongoloids. The Kami, Damai, Sarki, Bahun, Chhettri and Thakuri belong to the Aryan race, whereas the Rai, Limboo, Newar, Gurung, Tamang, Mangar, Jogi, Bhujel, Thami, Yolmo, Sherpa, Dewan and Mukhia belong to the Mongoloid group (Gurung, 2011).

The Nepali caste hierarchy in the Sikkim and Darjeeling hills is said to be more or less similar to that of Nepal due to the migration history between them (Rahman, 2006). The Nepali caste hierarchy in this region has which can be divided into three groups: The High (upper), Middle (low) and the Low (Untouchables). The high castes include the Bahuns, Thakuris and the Chhettris and are also known as the Tagadharis. The middle or the lower castes include Newar, Rai, Limbu, Yakha, Mangar, Thami, Sunuwar, Gurung, Tamang, Bhujel, Jogi, Yolmo and Sherpa, also known as Matawalis and at the bottom of the hierarchy are the Untouchable castes that include the Kami, Damai and Sarki (Subba, 1989). The above-mentioned groups are ranked along the notion of purity and pollution, with Tagadharis considered to be the purest and the untouchables as ritually polluting (Cox, 1994). In terms of commensality, the Nepali castes can be divided into two: ‘Pani chalne jat’ (Chhut) and ‘Pani na chal ne jat’ (Achhut) (Subba, 1985; Subba, 1989). The Tagadharis and Matawalis belong to the “Chutt” (pure) category, and the untouchables belong to the Achutt (impure) category. These untouchable Nepali castes traditionally were entitled to carry out caste-based occupations; Kamis, the blacksmiths and goldsmiths, Damai, the musicians and tailors and Sarkis, the cobblers and the carpenters. Among the untouchables, Kamis are said to have the highest position in the caste hierarchy, followed by the Sarkis and at the bottom, the Damai (Singh, 1993).

Objectives

The key objectives of this paper are to discuss the challenges faced by the

Kami, Damai and Sarki who are excluded from the Scheduled Caste Category and how this administrative exclusion translates into their everyday life.

Methodology

This paper is based on the data drawn from fieldwork in Mellidara-Paiyong GPU South, Sikkim, from 259 Kami, Damai and Sarki with the help of an interview schedule and interview guide. These three marginalised communities face multiple crises in society today; this paper seeks to highlight one such crisis that has a significant impact on their everyday interactions. With the help of case studies, this paper attempts to explain the challenges faced by the Kami, Damai and Sarki who are excluded from the SC category and how everyday life experiences and interactions are impacted by inclusion in and exclusion from the Scheduled Caste Category.

Scheduled Caste Category in Sikkim: Inclusion and Exclusion

The present paper studies the Kami, Damai and Sarki in two groups: 1) those included in the Scheduled Caste (SC) Category and 2) those excluded from it.

1. The Kami, Damai and Sarki who are included in the SC Category are those who profess Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism (The Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Caste Order, 1978).
2. The Kami, Damai and Sarki who are excluded from the SC category can be further divided into two: a) those who are Christians, and b) those who are Hindus but do not have 'Certificate of Identification' (COI) or 'Sikkim Subject Certificate' (SSC).

The exclusion of Christian Kami, Damai and Sarki from the SC category is a pan-Indian issue (Natarajan, 2010). This group may have the required documents (COI/SSC), but due to their religion and the Order of 1978, the state does not recognise them as SCs. The OBC and the ST categories are more inclusive in terms of religion, for example, a Rai or a Bhutia who is Christian by faith is eligible for an OBC and an ST certificate, respectively. But the SC category is not inclusive in this case, as a Christian Kami/Damai/Sarki is not eligible for an SC certificate.

The exclusion of the second group from the SC Category is more complex than the first group. And in order to understand the exclusion of this second group, we need to understand what is Sikkim Subject is, the Certificate of Identification, and the importance of possessing these certificates. Sikkim Subject Certificate and Certificate of Identification are citizenship proof in the case of the state of Sikkim. Sikkim Subject status is a special citizenship right of the Sikkimese cultural communities; it is the foundation for gaining privileges like access to land, livelihood, resources and employment in the government sector in Sikkim (Pradhan, 2021).

Certificate of Identification in Sikkim is issued to a citizen: a) who is a wife/daughter/son of the person who has a Sikkim Subject, b) who is a grandchild/brother of the same father who has a Sikkim Subject, and c) who possesses agricultural land in their name. (Government of India, 2015)

For any person seeking to procure an SC certificate (same case for ST/OBC certificate) in Sikkim, having a COI or their father's SSC certificate is not just essential but mandatory. (Government of Sikkim, n.d.) (Government of Sikkim, General Section, 2023). The amendment of the Sikkim Subject Regulation Act in the year 1962 recognised the land-owning Nepali community as "Sikkim Subject". The Nepali landless peasants were excluded from this status (Pradhan, 2021). Drawing inferences from this fact, we can understand why the majority of the Kami, Damai and Sarki of Mellidara-Paiyong GPU do not possess a COI/SSC. Their ritual status in the traditional caste hierarchy marginalised them socio-economically, which meant that most of them did not have access to land. This disadvantage caused them to be excluded from the Sikkim Subject status, the repercussions of which can be seen in the Sikkimese society today.

The degree of caste-discrimination might have changed, but it is not totally absent from the society of Sikkim. Scholars (Subba, 1989; Sharma, 1997; Subba, 2002; Choudhury, 2006) observe that caste rules in this region are more relaxed in comparison to Nepal due to various factors like the migration of Nepali castes, which has eroded much of the control that the Nepali upper castes (Tagadharis) had in Nepal. Besides, the spread of education, modernisation, and change in traditional occupation have also brought about changes in inter-caste relations; but having said that, they do not deny the presence of caste-based discrimination. Even with all the above-mentioned factors that could bring emancipation, the members of these three

marginalised communities in Sikkim continue to face discrimination, humiliation and marginalisation in the hands of society. The field data of Mellidara-Paiyong GPU discovers similar facts as argued by the scholars above. There have been impactful changes in the relations brought about by education, modernisation, change in occupations, governmental safeguards, awareness, etc. However, the practice of commensality, endogamy, reproduction and maintenance of caste boundaries is still very much visible in the everyday lives of the communities living at Mellidara Paiyong GPU. These boundaries have just changed a bit to adapt to modern-day society; just like Jayaram argues, ‘The caste system has been the most flexible of the primordial institutional arrangements anywhere in the world, and it has shown an extraordinary capacity to adapt itself to a variety of changing, and often apparently contradictory, socio-economic conditions’ (Jayaram, 1996).

It becomes very important to highlight here that these two groups of Kami, Damai and Sarki, who have been administratively excluded, face the same discrimination (if not more) as those who are included in the SC category. But the position of the former is much more precarious than the latter because the latter has the tool (reservation policy/constitutional safeguards) to uplift their socio-economic position, while the former lacks the same.

As we can see from the above arguments that education, change in occupations, reservation policy etc., can bring considerable changes in caste-relations. But excluding some groups of Kami, Damai and Sarki from the SC category means taking away their chance of social mobility. One of the main purposes of the reservation policy was to try and bridge the gap between the marginalised and the privileged, but with such exclusions, even the most effective policies are bound to fail.

The term Scheduled Caste was used for the first time in April 1935, with the British Government issuing the Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order 1936 (Michael, 2007). According to Ghurye (1969), the term Scheduled caste is a phrase standardised by the Constitution of India, but the Constitution does not have a proper definition for it. Ghurye defines the Scheduled Castes as groups which are named in the Scheduled Castes Order in force for the time being”. With the help of Article 341, the President of India, in consultation with the head of a particular State, can notify by an order which castes, groups, or tribes of that State can be included in the

Scheduled caste list. The second clause of the Article gives the Parliament the power to pass a law to include or exclude from the list notified by the President (Ghurye, 1969). This inclusion in and exclusion from the Schedule is done on the basis of social, economic and educational backwardness of the communities. The state needs to promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of people (SC/ST) and give them protection from injustice and exploitation (Gupta, 2023). When we look at the inclusion and exclusion criteria, all groups of Kami, Damai and Sarki qualify as they are socially, economically and educationally backwards in comparison to the other communities living in the same society.

Reservation Policy for the Scheduled Castes

The central and state governments of India have their reservation policies laid down for the SCs. According to (Gupta, 2023), seats are reserved for the SCs in government jobs, educational institutions and economic sectors under article 16 (4), 46, 335 of the Indian Constitution. In the state of Sikkim, the reservation percentage of the SC community is 5% (Department of Personnel and Training, Govt. of India, 2014).

As pointed out by Gupta (2023), despite the reservation policies, the SCs of India are still unable to improve their socio-economic conditions. Similarly, the Kami, Damai and Sarki in Sikkim too have not been able to improve their conditions substantially despite the reservations. This dismal position of the three communities could be explained in terms of administrative exclusion. Because a major section of the Kami, Damai and Sarki are excluded from the SC category which the advantages of the policies have not been able to percolate to all the sections of these communities.

Out of the 259 Kami, Damai Sarki respondents of Mellidara-Paiyong GPU, only 54 had SC certificates. Which means that only a mere 20.84% of the entire Kami Damai and Sarki population would be able to avail the safeguards for belonging to a marginalised community and better their social standing. The ones included in the schedule can economically and socially better their position with higher education and government jobs, which is seen to have a positive impact on their social position as well. But it is not the same for the ones excluded from the schedule. The Kami, Damai and Sarki, who are not included in the SC category, can be seen as the marginal of the marginalised. Firstly, they face exclusion because of their ritual status

in the traditional caste hierarchy, and secondly, they have been administratively deprived of their chance of upward social mobility.

Everyday Interactions and Differences- Inclusion in and Exclusion from SC Category

The socio-economic status of a Kami, Damai and Sarki plays an important role in the way the Others in the society interact with them. The case studies below highlight instances to further emphasise this argument.

Case Study 1: A well-educated ex-panchayat with a decent economic background from the Damai community had a very different experience story to share than that of a Damai agricultural labourer of Upper Paiyong Village. Both of these people are involved in Dairy Farming- while the agricultural labourer recorded a few instances where the members of the ‘other’ community have refused to purchase milk from him due to his caste status, the case was not the same for the ex-panchayat. This does not mean that the latter has not faced his fair share of caste prejudices; it is just that he was able to better his socio-economic position, and thereby, the way the Others in the society interacted with him became better.

Case Study 2: A political figure of Melli Bazar belonging to the Kami community recalls an incident at a funeral at a Rai community household. He entered the ‘ancestral worship room’ where the body of the deceased was placed- no questions asked, no disappointments or hushed comments. He said that he belonged to a community that was considered to be an ‘untouchable’ in the past, but there are little or no caste boundaries maintained by the Others in the society because of his political stature. However, he pointed out that in the same funeral home, another member of the Kami community (a butcher) is not provided with the same courtesy because this person’s socio-economic status is not of the same stature.

In both case 1 and case 2, the ex-panchayat of Upper Paiyong and the Political figure of Melli have faced caste prejudices in the past, but their positions in the villages shifted and changed once they could change their socio-economic status. What needs to be emphasised here is that the ex-panchayat and the political figure could better their socio-economic conditions because they had the tool to do so, i.e. inclusion in the SC Category; whereas the agricultural labourer and the butcher could not better their position because

of the administrative exclusion. This speaks volumes about the importance of being included in the SC category.

Case Study 3: A Christian Damai of Mellidara village points out that he has faced caste prejudices while he was Hindu and also after conversion. For this paper, we will highlight only the instance which he faced at Church for the sake of relevance. While helping out at a Church program, a fellow Christian belonging to a Rai community asked him to move out of the kitchen and sort of reprimanded him for creating an awkward situation. ‘You should know that you are not supposed to be in the kitchen’. This incident shows that Christianity does not evade one’s caste status and the prejudices that come along with it. If this Christian Damai had been entitled to an SC Certificate just like a Christian Rai and Christian Bhutia of the same village are entitled to an OBC and ST certificate, respectively, he would have had the tool for social mobility, and then he would not have to face such discrimination.

Conclusion

Due to the historical exclusion based on their ritual status in the caste hierarchy, the Kami, Damai and Sarki of Sikkim are socio-economically marginalised in comparison to the others in Sikkim (Subba, 1989). Despite modernisation, education, changes in occupation, reservation, safeguards, etc., they are unable to uplift their socio-economic conditions. In the case of Sikkim, this inability to substantially better their positions can be explained in terms of the exclusion of a vast majority from the SC category. The administratively excluded Kami, Damai and Sarki face the same amount of caste prejudices (if not more) as their SC counterparts, but the former do not have access to the same resources and tools of upward social mobility as the latter; this makes them marginal to the marginalised.

While the exclusion of Christian Kami, Damai and Sarki from the SC category is a pan-Indian issue, the exclusion of Hindu Kami, Damai and Sarki from the SC category who do not have Certificate of Identification (COI) or Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) is unique to the state of Sikkim. The caste hierarchy and caste rules among the Nepali community of Sikkim and Darjeeling are the same (Subba, 1989: 55-71); the process to procure an SC certificate is different. The Nepali community have a similar history and timeline of settlement in Sikkim and Darjeeling due to the shared history

between the two regions. However, the Hindu Kami, Damai and Sarki of Sikkim, with no COI and SSC, are deprived of the SC status that their counterparts in Darjeeling can avail without any administrative hindrance¹ (COI/SSC).

In relation to the Scheduled Caste, the pan-Indian scenario has two categories- the Hindu Dalits and the Christian Dalits; but in the state of Sikkim, we can see the creation of a new category in addition to the above two, i.e. Hindu Kami, Damai and Sarki who are not entitled to SC status in Sikkim. This new category has been created administratively and can be understood in relation to the Sikkim Subject Regulation Act, SSC and COI. Therefore, while framing policies and safeguards, one cannot look at these marginalised communities in Sikkim as a singular group. Though traditionally they belong to the ‘untouchable’ caste in the Nepali caste hierarchy and share common caste names, we need to understand the nuances, the layers and the intersections among them.

The policies and safeguards laid down for the SCs, regardless of their effectiveness and efficiency, cannot be truly efficacious if it does not include all the marginalised. The policies need to be revamped, and the administration needs to recognise all the categories of Kami, Damai and Sarki if they want a holistic empowerment of the marginalised or else, we will just be creating more cleavages among the marginalised.

Note

1. For the application process of the Scheduled Caste Certificate in Darjeeling (West Bengal), please see ISSUANCE OF CASTE CERTIFICATES - Tribal (adibasikalyan.gov.in)

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