

Reciprocity and Relations following Death: Reflections on the Practice of “Sarau” in Sikkim

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Abstract: *The reciprocal exchange of goods and gifts following the death, among the kin and community, among the Nepalis in Sikkim and other places is called Sarau. The practice is prevalent among the other two prominent communities of Sikkim, the Lepchas and Bhutias, although they use different names. The practice is socially standardized and keep the community members connected and united. The differential perceptions and practice about the goods exchanged at the individual level however could be a source of social cohesion. Although the practice is universal among the Nepalis one can notice some changes in recent years. Drawing from her participatory observations the author gives a changing account of the practice of Sarau and its social significance among the Nepalis of Sikkim.*

Keywords: Sarau, Nepalis of Sikkim, reciprocity, social solidarity, gift exchange, social tension.

Introduction

The social relationship is primarily accepted as a fundamental foundation of all social formations and the basis of human society and the norm of reciprocity is a universal principle (Gouldner 1960), on which social relations, both individual and group relations, work. The social norm of reciprocity works on the collectively shared perception that a gift or favour or compassion will be reciprocated in one form or the other. Based on the expectation that people will respond to each other in similar ways in similar situations, reciprocal norms promote the mutual interdependence, love, care, emotions and strengthen social solidarity. Various forms of reciprocity and their social significance have been documented in various classical works of the sociologist and anthropologists. The theorists in general agree that social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations (Emerson 1976 cited in Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005) and these interactions are usually seen as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person (Blau 1964 cited in Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005).

Sarau in Sikkim and also among the Nepalis in other places, is such a norm of reciprocity that involves reciprocal obligations during various occasions like birth, marriage and death. The state of Sikkim is ethnically and culturally diverse; it is inhabited by three major ethnic groups, namely, Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepalis practicing three predominant religious world views - Hinduism (57.76 percent), Buddhism (27.39 percent) having a blend of animistic practices, and Christianity (9.91 percent) as per 2011 Census. Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to explore how material exchanges based on the principle of reciprocity are practiced following the death in Sikkimese society and how the practice has evolved over the years. Drawing from personal experiences and day to day observations, I endeavor to depict the system, evolution and significance of reciprocal relationship, and how the system works in maintaining social relationships and solidarity in social life of the Sikkimese Nepalis.

Conceptual Framework

How the norms of reciprocity in various forms work in social life could be found in the works of sociologists and anthropologists. Simmel (1950), Malinowski (1926), Marcel Mauss (1950), Gouldner (1960) and Levi-Strauss (1969) widely discussed about the reciprocal obligations and illuminated the concept and its dimensions. Arguing from the structuralist perspective, Levi-Strauss (1969) stated that reciprocity is a universal norm and basis of human relationships (cited in Gouldner 1960) which promotes the mutual interdependence, collective solidarity, contributing to the stability of a social system. In the similar vein, Hobhouse (1906) and Thurnwald (1932) also held reciprocity as the vital principle of society and the basis of the entire social and ethical life of primitive civilizations (cited in Gouldner 1960). Mauss has stated that reciprocity creates obligations and using Robert Axelrod's terminology is a tit-for-tat strategy (Parisi and Ghei 2003) and reciprocating demonstrates one's own liberality, honour, and wealth. The nature and pattern of reciprocity also reflects social networks, which Bourdieu calls social capital (Putnam 2001, cited in Diekmann 2004).

The nature and significance of reciprocity is contextual, which need to be understood and located in a cultural context. Gouldner (1960) considered reciprocity as "folk belief" that involves the culturally drawn collective expectations. As a cultural mandate, reciprocity implies how one should behave and obligated to behave reciprocally. For instance, in Polynesia, failure to reciprocate often signify losing *mana*, - one's spiritual source of authority and wealth (Molm et. al. 2007). Therefore, despite its universal

practice, there are studies (Parker 1998; Rousseau & Schalk 2000) that bring to light that every individual does not value reciprocity in the same degree and there is a lot of cross cultural and individual variations in the practice of reciprocity (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005).

“Sarau” among the Nepalis of Sikkim: A First-hand View

Sarau is an ethnic term for reciprocity used by the Nepalis in Sikkim, Darjeeling Hills and in other places. A similar practice of gift exchange can be found among the other communities of Sikkim, namely the Lepchas and Bhutias. The Bhutias use their term *thusho* and the Lepchas call it *adut*. The village where I spent my childhood days in south district of Sikkim was multi-ethnic, inhabited by the members of two predominant communities, namely, the Chettri-Bahun, who were the upper-caste Hindu, and the Lepcha a Buddhist tribe. Other communities in the village like Rai, Limbu who were widely considered as Hindus but had their own strong animistic practices with their own priests or Shamans. There were some Sherpa households and very few Bhutia households, who were predominantly Buddhist. However, the trace of animism was strong and one could also notice a very strong synthesis of animistic practices with their dominant world view among the Hindus as well as the Buddhists.

My reminiscences of the nature of reciprocity that was in practice in those days among two predominant communities - the Lepchas and Chettri-Bahun are so different from the practices of today. The reciprocal practice of *Sarau* has evolved over the years and today one can see much wider participation, often beyond the close kin and community. Earlier, the religious differences and socio-cultural distinctiveness were specifically pronounced in the nature of reciprocity practiced in birth, marriage and death rituals.

The death ceremony and rituals among Buddhist Lepchas, as I remember, were a combination of Buddhist and animistic traditions. The Buddhist Lamas (Monks) and the Lepcha priest, namely, *Boongthing*, were regarded as inevitable for performing the death rituals. The observance of death rituals during grieving period was considered to be primarily an intra-community affair and so was the practice of *Sarau* or gift exchange. *Sarau* following death used to be in the form of material support, both in cash and kind. The participation of each household of the community in the village was socially obligatory especially in helping the family by providing free labour in performing various works. The death rituals as I have witnessed among the Lepcha and Bhutia used to be relatively expensive and elaborate affair and continued for days. I still remember the members of other communities

discussing how these expensive rituals and practices often put some families to economic hardship. However, for the concerned community, the justification was rooted in cultural and religious faith and beliefs. Since the cremation of body depended on the availability of auspicious date, often predicted by monks/ Lamas, which meant a wait for a few days and even a week, serving food to the visitors and monks by the bereaved family would continue for days. It was customary to serve the visitors with proper meals, which included not only non-vegetarian items but also locally brewed liquor Raksi or fermented millet *chiang*, till the rituals were over. However, such serving of the food was restricted to the visiting relatives and members of the community. Therefore, to meet the huge expenses incurred, the collective support from the community households in the form of firewood for cremation and cooking, Dalda¹(Vanaspati Oil) for rituals purpose, rice, vegetables, *chiang*², had a huge use value. The materials given as gifts by the community members had both material and symbolic value. Moreover, these conventional practices were almost obligatory and mandatory for all community people as they were reciprocated whenever such situations arose in other families of the community. While the assistance in the form of cash, kind and free labour provided instrumental value, the voluntary nature of assistance without any agreements and reciprocal expectation during such uncertain period following death, had a high symbolic significance. The exchange was done not only to meet a cultural norm but also to express social solidarity. The fear of social isolation and the expectations of similar act in similar situations, often works as underlying principle for such a practice. The nature of reciprocity was mostly an intra-community affair and the participation of other communities was very restricted. The participation of non-community members was restricted to participation in funeral procession and in the final day *Kutse Shegu*³ and the Sarau done by them would always be in the form of exchange of cash. The non-community visitors during the mourning period, if there were any, were also not served with full meals.

The practices during the mourning period after death were however significantly different among the Hindu Chettri-Bahun communities. Serving the visitors during the grieving period was often restricted to tea and snacks. The principle purity-pollution was strictly adhered to in cooking and serving. The guests coming from a distance were served snacks such as *puri-sabji* prepared away from the *maraughar*,⁴ kitchen or hearth. Meals for the relatives coming from long distance was cooked in neighbors' or nearby relative's house close by.

Traditionally, among the Chettri-Bahun the gifts included “*mano*⁵ – *chamal*” along with butter or ghee, ginger, sugar etc. to the *marau* within five to ten days of the incidence of death. The intra- community solidarity was apparent as it was binding for all households of the community to offer something material. This offering has substantive value as these were the items used by “*kriya – putri*”⁶. The items are also used for preparing food items during *antheysti Kriya*⁷ or *kam* (widely used in Sikkim), which would take place on the 13th day after death. However, despite being Hindu, I noticed that my parents and any other visitor of other Nepali communities were never offering *mano-chamal* and *sarau* would take the forms of cash and other kinds. Unlike among the Lepcha and Bhutia, where the assistance in the form of kind often included locally prepared Rakshi and fermented millet, among the Chettri-Bahun communities, items like tealeaf, fruits, sugar, milk etc. were included, which were widely required to serve the visitors during grieving period.

The justification offered by my father and the fellow villagers was that “*marau ko lagi maanchey tayarihudaina*” meaning *death never comes prepared* unlike occasion like wedding and child birth, when people have ample time to be prepared and save at the time of need. Therefore, the collective support in the forms of cash and kind come handy for the bereaved family that are not well off. For the lower and middleclass families too such community support in the form of cash and kind is highly useful. The rich families too do not say “no” to the Sarau practices because they take it as a symbol of social support and as a symbol of community solidarity at the time of crisis. Such participation in village was almost mandatory at the community and village level and at least one person from each household did participate in funeral procession or paid a visit during the grieving period or in the final ceremony. If for some unavoidable reasons, they were unable to participate, they used to send the condolence offering through some other people as their representative. The underlying reason for mandatory participation in rituals and give Sarau is the fear of social isolation. There was a saying “*marda malamipaudiana*”, which means, in case of non-participation, you will be socially isolated in such situation. The participation and assistance in the form of cash and kind was symbolically and substantively important as it marked the expression of solidarity through community participation.

The village being agrarian in nature, agriculture was the major source of livelihood except for a very few individuals, who were doing government service as school teacher, in the forest department, health centers, animal and veterinary services and so on. Therefore, despite being a small village

with two communities remaining in adjacent hamlets, the ethnic boundary was clearly and rigidly maintained as the death and other rituals used to be purely intra community affairs. The practice of Sarau existed beyond the community only in a very few cases, mostly among the colleagues in a common service and among the higher classes. Therefore, Mauss' argument that reciprocity clearly demonstrated one's own liberality, honour, wealth and social status was also evidently pronounced in the village. The quantity and quality of the exchange also varied according to the social prestige and position of the family in the village. My father being widely respected as headmaster used to participate among all communities either in the funeral procession or during the mourning period or on the day of the final ritual. He used to offer Sarau mostly in the form of cash, but sometimes, both in cash and kind. Such exchanges helped reproduce his high position in society.

The second narration is based on my experiences in the 1989 in another village called Makha in East Sikkim where my parental house still exists. The tragic incident of passing away of my grandma in my own house gave me the ample opportunity to observe the Sarau practices in my village at the community level and beyond. The village was inhabited by different Nepali castes and communities. There was diversity in terms of religion and communities but common language (i.e. Nepali), physical proximity and a sense of common neighborhood facilitated inter-community participation in death, and other rituals. Sarau used to be both in the form of cash and kind, however offering in cash was more common. The reciprocal exchange or *sarau* was witnessed not only in the form of cash and kind but also helping the *marauhar* with free labour from the time of death to the day of final rituals. The village youth used to take the responsibilities in the form of managing and coordinating work like funeral procession construction of tent/pandal, serving tea and snacks to the visitors, shopping, cooking and serving food till the final ceremony was over. However, the community people and kin were widely involved in performing all rituals and activities. The village was inhabited mostly by the Hindu families but there were a few Buddhist and Christian families as well and one could see the participation of people from all communities in death and other rituals with Sarau exchanges.

Another incident of death in our family was on 14th February 2017, when my mother passed away. After the death my mother the rites and rituals followed and I could notice some significant changes in the practice of Sarau as compared to 1990s. In the 1989, the community participation was prominent and overwhelming. My mother was a highly respected school teacher at a time when very few women were educated and were working

as school teacher in Sikkim in the early 1950s. In those days, literacy rate was low and women receiving education was unheard of. She started her teaching career at the age of 16, after passing her high school examination from a boarding school in Darjeeling. She was known for her high work commitment and dedication, for which she was later honored with State and National Award for Teachers. A strict disciplinarian she encouraged us, the six siblings, to go for higher education. I often heard from the villagers and her students, some of whom are now occupying high positions in State bureaucracy and in various government offices, about her commitment, her endeavor and zeal in spreading the education and literacy in the village. She had the record of even not availing the maternity leave during birth of six of us and joining school within three to seven days of child birth, immediately after birth rites were over. It is because of her life long sacrifice and commitment, her death was a big issue and people from within and outside the village and community came forward to pay their last tribute and respect. Unlike on the earlier occasions, when the collective participation was restricted within village, this time around, apart from the participation from the village and community the well-wishers and admirers from different parts of state came forward to offer condolences. Diekmann (2004) and Putnam (2001) highlighted a close association between social capital and the norms of reciprocity and this was amply evident in the wider participation of people in mourning my mother's death. Our relatives from the sides of our parents came with Sarau gifts, the friends and colleagues of mine and those of all by siblings, who are working in different parts of the State, my mother's former students, who represented different castes and communities, came for the mourning. My mother being a Christian and my father a liberal Hindu, the ceremonies were a combination of both religious traditions.

Parisi and Ghei (2003) have observed that gift giving and other forms of exchange work on the principle of reciprocity. The huge participation in the form of Sarau practices at the time of death of my mother could, thus, be explained as a response to our family participation in similar situations to the families of the fellow villagers, community people and in the larger society. Pakyntein (2011) in a study of reciprocity among Pnar Society in Meghalaya has also reported that the level of participation and the nature of exchange vary depending on the social status and position of the family or individuals involved in such exchanges. Reciprocity is obligational (Mauss 1950) and receiving cash and kind is necessary for maintenance of social relationships; refusal to receive gifts, on the other hand, was not in conformity with the social expectations and would mean refusal to accept the

relationship. Therefore, the offerings, both in cash and kind, were accepted and acknowledged with gratitude and in conformity with the social tradition.

A major shift has been noticed in terms of community participation and nature of physical support. The collective participation of village youth throughout the mourning period for assisting in various work and even staying during the night, which was seen in earlier cases, seemed to have relatively weakened this time around. My village, which is located at a distance of 42 Kms from Gangtok, has not remained isolated from the wider structural transformation that has affected the Sikkimese society. The awareness of education, the initiatives of the state government for free and compulsory education and incentive given by the state government in terms of higher and technical education have been grabbed by both hands by the villagers. The development initiatives of the state since 1989, existence of Senior Secondary School and many Junior High school, private schools in the village, infrastructural developments in the form of road connectivity, awareness through mass and social media and aspirations for higher education and job opportunities and incentives given by the state government have contributed positively towards overall development of the people. This has made the members of the younger generation, even in villages, more mobile; they now migrate to distant places, both within and outside the state, in their efforts to tap educational and employment opportunities. Back in 1989, I still remember as a young girl when we used to be in the village during holidays, we often used to participate in *marauhar* in our neighborhood especially in assisting them various works, mostly serving tea and taking care of the visitors. A clear gender division was maintained then; the males were responsible for the outside work like construction of shed in the outside courtyard for visitors, preparing the burial ground, temporary dining place and so on, while the women had to prepare food and serve food and tea to the guests. This time, since a large majority of the youth were out of village in connection with study and jobs, the participation of youth in the rites and rituals was largely absent. In the absence of youth volunteers, the mourning families now hire the services of the professional groups, especially for catering services for all the days and for the final day of rituals and ceremony.

One can also notice a significant change in selection of the materials for gift. Although, the essence has remained same over the years, the changing realities of society, impact of market and global culture could be noticed in selection of gifts and the amount of cash. One noticeable change is offering food to the visitors during the mourning period, with the common logic that guests come from faraway places because of expanding social network of

the mourning family; this was earlier restricted only to the day of Sradh, or final day ceremony. One can also see flexibility in observing the commensality as people representing different castes and communities interdine. I have observed the same practice among the Hindu Chettri-Bahun and other Nepali communities. The other changes includes the change in menu and recipes reflecting the family honour and status, replacement of traditional gift items like ghee, rice and *chiang* etc. with new market oriented product like soft drinks viz, Coke, Fanta, Sprite, tealeaf, sugar, juices, dry fruits, *atta*, flour, fruits and even biscuits, cooking oil, vegetables etc., and sometimes even a sack of rice. The contribution in the form of cash, which varies depending on degree of closeness as well as the socio-economic status of the bereaved family and the gift giver has remained universal. Catering service especially for preparing food has now become almost common trend. In some pockets of Sikkim, however, the role of Samaj/ *Kidu/ tarzoom* in village and community association of Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha respectively is still found and active. The practice of serving non-vegetarian items and use of liquor and alcohol has either been stopped or reduced to a considerable extent even among the Lepcha-Bhutia communities. Pakyntein (2011) has observed that although the essence of reciprocity has remained and is still in practice, there has been substantial modification in the modes of gifting and exchange of free service among Khasi-Pnar society in Meghalaya. However, despite all changes, the nature of reciprocity in Sarau has retained its essence in contemporary Sikkim, extending beyond ethnic, religious, caste and village boundaries, a trend set into motion by the external forces like modernization and structural transformation in Sikkim, a state which is in transition but still firmly rooted in tradition.

Although going through some modifications in recent years, the reciprocal exchange in Sarau carries a both moral and material support, thus having both symbolic and substantive value. The social obligation here is bound by tradition, although the subjects involved in the exchange, apply their agencies in bringing about some improvisations. However, in all cases the Sarau is of great help for the needy in particular, the cash and kind, the practice brings and provide strength to the family in bereavement. The financial burden of serving food to the visitors is to a large extent compensated by the financial and material support. Unlike marriage where people might comment about the mismanagement and quality of food being served, experience suggests that death being a tragic occasion, no visitor or participant complains about the quality of food being served or about hospitality. Looking at it critically, the new trend also underlines some

concerns that indicate to what Merton would have termed the dysfunctional aspects of the evolving system. Since a gift is never free (Mauss 1950), and it engages the honour of both the giver and receiver and the expectation that people will reciprocate similarly, the growing trend of dependence on monetary and material goods sometimes creates stress to a middleclass family. Interactions with many friends of mine from middleclass background and state government employees brought to light that despite its virtually voluntary nature and functional importance, there are situations, when many such incidents occur simultaneously, reciprocal obligations during death, marriage, child birth, visiting people in hospital etc. sometime put them in financial stress and time constraint.

The practice of Sarau among the Nepalis in Sikkim has evolved over the years, from an intra- community practice of exchange following death to a form of exchange that involves all the friends and intimate ones, besides the members of one's own community. One can see that the involvement of the members of one's immediate community has thinned over the years because the dispersal of the younger generation for education and job. The mode of selection of the materials for exchange has also changed as people now prefer global products and cash rather than agricultural products, which they used to exchange earlier. Despite these changes in practice Sarau remains a major institution of social solidarity; it also helps perpetuation of social hierarchy as selection of "gift" is done in conformity with one's social position and financial condition.

Notes

1. Dalda or Vanaspati oil for lighting lamp in the name of departed soul as common among Buddhists
2. Locally fermented millet having alcoholic content
3. The ceremony called Kutse Shegu is held on the 49th day following the death and is aimed to purify the atmosphere. All the well-wishers are invited to visit the house of the deceased. Food and drinks are offered to the visitors. In this ceremony those who could not pay their condolences earlier do so by offering a folded *khada* and some money to the bereaved family.
4. A Nepali term *maraghar* literally means house where death has taken place.

5. Mano, is copper container used for measuring grains almost equivalent to half kg and *chamal* means rice. Therefore Mano-Chamal refers to one full container of rice
6. The sons of the deceased who performs all rituals and remains isolated taking food only once in a day
7. The final death rituals and ceremony takes place in 13th Day among Hindu Chettri- Bahun.

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