



## Traditional Caste Based Occupations

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### Historical Background

The term '*Dalit*', is a relatively new term used to label the so called low and former untouchable castes referred to in Old Legal Code of 1854, *Pani nachalne chhoi chhito halnu parne jat* (people from whom water is not accepted and whose touch requires sprinkling of holy water) (Dahal *et.al.* 2002). In general *Dalit* is used to refer to the groups who are put in the lowest rung of the social hierarchy in caste system. Its connotation is a group of people who are *poor, oppressed, suppressed and exploited*. Some tend to indicate the association of the term *Dalit* to the Nepali/Hindu word *Daldal*, meaning swamp. Those favouring these meanings see the *Dalits* as people who are living in swamps, coming out of which is difficult and extremely hard, if not impossible. The swamp is a metaphor for the socio-cultural milieu in which *Dalits* were trapped throughout the history (Bhattachan, 2005). Further, Upreti (2004) explains how the caste structure is based on Hindu Varna system which divides people into four categories according to their occupational activities viz., the *Brahmin* (learned people, priests), the *Chhetri* (warriors), the *Vaishya* (trader and agriculturist), and the *Sudra* (people in menial services). Originally, it had merely meant the type of work which anyone could do but gradually it became a hereditary idea. This transformation of Varnas led to the present complex and rigid caste system in Nepal. One hypothesis is that defeated *Drabids* were compelled by *Aryans* to serve them. Later on *Drabid* was referred to as untouchable and inferior or low class. They were confined only to their traditional occupations in exploitative manner. In the more recent history *Dalits* did not get access to land and other productive resources in agrarian society because the king and the state had distributed land only to nearly related people, service holders, priests, and their supporters.

Although the untouchability and discrimination on the basis of caste were formally abolished by the 1963 Civil Code, by the 1991 Constitution and ultimately by the 2006 Untouchability- free Nation Parliamentary Declaration, they prevail widely in the Nepalese society.

### Types of Traditional Caste Based Occupations

*Dalits* constitute 13 percent of total population (CBS, 2001) and they are being deprived of many of socio-cultural, political and economic rights because of prevalence of age old traditional practices. It is a fact that *Dalits* are the richest source of art, skills and culture of the Nepalese society and their traditional occupations are a part of the national culture and identity. A study conducted by Bhattachan (et al 2002)

proved that *Dalits* have great skills in specific crafts such as metalwork, leatherwork, and music. Yet, in a number of places this segment of the population could not get social respect because of the ineffective enforcement of the laws making the caste system punishable (NPC, 2002). The artisans are not allowed to train others or to be employed in the related industries. If their skills were recognised by the Center for Technical Education and Vocational Training, they could get jobs in different organisations.

According to Dahal (et al, 2002) the main economic activity of the majority of *Dalits* is wage labour. In addition to this, the cast based traditional occupations such as black smithy, leather work, tailoring, etc. are also an important source of income. *Kami* group makes agricultural tools and household utensils such as sickles, knives, axes, hoes, spades, shares (plough tips) and nails, they do repair works when needed. A gold smith or *Sunar* make golden or silver ornaments. *Parkis* are bamboo baskets and mats weavers. *Chunara* group of far western Nepal produce wooden utensils. *Damai*, both men and women, are tailors; *Serki* are leather shoe makers; *Badi* are potters who, apart from producing clay pots, are famous for the skill of making good smoking pipes. Some *Badis* are singers and dancers. *Gaine* sing songs to the tune of the traditional instrument- *Saranghi*. In case of Terai *Dalits*, *Chamar* are leather workers- they make and polish shoes and dispose off dead animals' carcasses, *Chamar* women work as midwives. *Tantis* are weavers and *Dom* and *Halkhor* clean public streets and bath rooms for the government as well as individual households. *Dhobis* are washer men by profession.

### The Caste Based Occupations as Livelihood Source

Most of the *Dalits* living in the rural areas work as per tradition involving in *bali ghare pratha* (eastern Nepal) or *khali pratha* (western Nepal) or *Khan* (Terai). That means that there is an informal patron-worker relationship rather than any type of a contract. For their services *Dalits* are paid mostly in kind (grains) and sometimes in cash depending upon the amount of land holding (for blacksmiths) and number of family members (for tailors). In addition, each craftsman also gets his traditional share (food, vegetables, cloths, etc.) when there is a festival, marriage or some other rituals in the house of the patron. The client-craftsman relationship can be temporary or permanent; normally it is renewed every year. In urban areas the involvement in the traditional occupations is more systematic and market-based; sometimes the businesses are legally registered. There is also a third possibility utilised mostly by *Dalits* living near the cities or highways, namely to combine traditional and commercial ways. Traditional way of contracting results in higher degree of caste based discrimination. Running more regulated business brings better income but nevertheless the social prejudices remain. Furthermore, all craftsmen are facing the same problem- the availability of mass and cheap products in the market.

Bhattachan et. al. (2000) noted that only 19% of *Dalits* are involved in traditional caste based occupations. Mainly *Damai* (tailors) continue their traditional profession. Dahal (2002), quoting Sharma et.al. (1980) found that *Damai* are those who maintain their occupation even if large number of people engages in agriculture. Then, some *Kami*, *Sarki* and *Dhobie* are involved in their caste based occupations regularly. But, among the *Kami* only gold smiths or *Sunar* have maintained their traditional job. The numbers of those involved in caste based occupations are decreasing mainly due to the mass production. (Dahal et.al. 2002)

Overall, gender participation in each occupation is found to be unequal except tailoring. However, in occupations such as shoe making, iron and gold smithy, women support male counterparts as assistants.

Some examples of income generated from traditional occupations are found in Dahal et.al. 2002, borrowed from Koirala. Among the major *Dalit* castes i.e. *Kami*, *Damai*, and *Sarki* in Bungkot village the main economic activities were as follows: *Damai* were sewing clothes and playing music as *forboya* (a custom of playing traditional music during family celebrations). They drew approximately 10 *pathi* (25 kg) unhusked rice and one *khangre* (15kg) of corn. *Kami* made and repaired home appliances as well as agricultural equipment. They got similar remuneration as *Damai*. *Sarki* did not continue traditional caste based occupation which was leather work and shoe making. Rather, they involved in activities such

as, washing pots during ceremonies, carrying *doli* (bride's litter) and other kinds of physical work. They earned cash and food items- for washing cooking pots - the leftovers and a small amount of cash, around Rs 30, for carrying *doli* and loads - Rs 30-70 a day depending on the situation and the distance; for ploughing land (employed permanently) - 100 kg of unhusked rice or corn per year depending on the area of the land they had to plough; for doing all the farm work of a high caste household, including ploughing, they were getting food for the family and approximately Rs 1000 cash per year. In addition, all these three *Dalit* castes had to work in traditional non caste specific jobs for their livelihood requirements -agricultural and domestic work (Rs 25-30 per day) and transitional occupations-masonry, carpentry (Rs 50-100).

### Livelihood Assets

While viewing or analysing the *Dalits* caste based occupations in context of sustainable livelihood framework according to Chambers and Conway (DFID, 2001; Ellis, 2000) these occupations are mix or combination of human, social, financial, physical, and natural assets or resources. Human assets include rich technical know- how of occupation; social assets are existing various institutions and micro level informal policies, caste based discrimination (product of caste system) how their relationship is developed and tied with clients or non *Dalits*; financial assets- investment, money, credit are measures of scale or size of enterprise; physical capital- materials, machines and other infrastructure; natural assets- direct or indirect relation with water, land, and forest resources (e.g. *Kami* people depend on forests for making coal). Proper combination of these assets gives reasonable or rational profit. If any asset is missing it will create obstacle for *Dalits'* enterprises. There is no doubt that the level of income determines the living standards- better livelihood is basis for other household expense and socioeconomic boost.

Taking into consideration the reality of *Dalit* traditional craftsmen the above discussed five assets are not sufficient to bring about changes in their livelihood. The services provided by the state or other organisations are neither enhancing nor mobilising these assets for livelihood improvement. The macro and micro economic policies are not supporting them as well. The state's policy (like 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan) has not been translated into programmes regarding modernisation of the traditional occupations on one hand, and on the other, organisations like WTO (World Trade Organization), SAPTA (South Asian Preferential Trading Agreement), SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area) are promoting products which can replace and exclude from the market traditional goods.

### Principles of Sustainable Livelihood System (SLA)

If the principles of sustainable livelihood are applied to look at *Dalits'* occupations the following factors in the development process have to be considered:

- i) *People centered*: The whole development process regarding *Dalits'* traditional caste based occupations must focus on the wellbeing of the artisans. The programmes, plans and policies should reflect understanding of the roots of the poverty associated with traditional caste based occupations.
- ii) *Responsive and Participatory*: The artisans themselves have to be considered key actors in identifying and addressing livelihood priorities.
- iii) *Holistic*: There should be a search for answers to the questions such as: Why do some *Dalits* adopt different livelihood strategies like agricultural labourers or *Haliya*? Why do the caste based occupations disappear?
- iv) *Dynamic*: As the situation and context are changing constantly from policy level to grassroots level interventions should respond with flexibility to changing *Dalits'* occupational situation.
- v) *Macro-micro link*: Macro-micro level policies and their implementation should protect *Dalits'* traditional occupations. Macro level structures and processes e.g. WTO, SAPTA, SAFTA, the government policies should create favorable environment for *Dalits'* caste based occupations. Similarly, the life conditions (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the occupations) must be

considered at the policy formulating stage. On one hand, they have not been able to preserve their traditional skills, on the other, no technology or method has been registered for the copy rights yet, despite the provision in WTO, SAFTA, and SAPTA documents.

vi) *Sustainable*: A good enterprise has to be sustainable economically, socially, institutionally and environmentally. But for *Dalits* craftsmen all those dimensions are bleak. Economically they make minimal profit, enough only for subsistence and moreover usually there is no alternative to their occupation. Socially their professions are not considered prestigious or respectful. Institutionally, there are no specific regulations, copy rights, proper contracts as a result the businesses are exploited, discriminated and dominated by the clients except for goldsmiths. Environmentally optimum utilisation of natural resources for some occupations is hazardous e.g. exploiting forest products, water reservoirs (in case of washer men).

vii) *Build on strength*: *Dalit* caste based occupations are generally viewed as inferior to others due to existing caste system and social perception. Indeed, an existing shoe factory is an extension or improved form of this traditional caste based occupation. It has been built on its experience, skills and knowledge. Further, it is not wise to forget how *Dalit* people and their rich art, skills and knowledge have contributed to Nepalese society and culture.

### State Policy and Efforts

There is a focus on poverty alleviation by increasing the income of rural population through employment generation in micro, cottage and small scale industries. Identification of industries with comparative advantages is one of the strategies. Protection of intellectual property rights has been also emphasised. (NPC, 2002)

Cultural, Tourism and Civil Aviation section of the Tenth Plan (2002-2007) underlined conservation, preservation and study of literature, art and culture along with their practical utilisation. It stressed increasing employment opportunities through protection of local skills and their commercial use. Importance was also attached to use of locally produced goods and services. There is a provision of legal protection and recognition of work of various literatures, musician, artist and encouragement to new talents. Participatory development of museums and cultural artifact with support from private sector to conserve traditional musical instruments, attires, ornaments, currency, idols, epics and arts was encouraged. (NPC, 2002)

In Comprehensive Peace Accord 2006, under article 7.1.3, very general statement was mentioned that Nepali people can utilize economic rights and this right will not be violated at any cost. This accord also clearly mentioned, under article 3.6, to end all forms of feudalism, to prepare, and to implement program for socioeconomic transformation. These provisions have not been reflected in Interim Constitutions 2007. But, in policy paper of Three Year Interim Plan : Approach Paper (2007-09), national identity will be strengthened by conserving and developing marginalized languages , literatures, arts, indigenous knowledge, skill and culture will be protected and promoted. This provision is only in portion of culture. Similarly, under trade and commerce chapter, effective policy will be formulated Nepali knowledge and skill internationally to protect the Intellectual Property Rights. These formal statements are not sufficient. In fact, this plan has not substantially highlighted and focused modernization of *Dalits* traditional caste based occupation. Furthermore, Three Year Interim Plan has also focused on study or research on identification and capitalization of *Dalits* traditional skills for its commercialization and market exploration. In addition to this, intensive study will also focus on Intellectual Property Right and capital formation (NPC, 2007).

In the National *Dalit* Strategy Report (Dahal et al, 2002) it is clearly stated that there is a need of modernisation of traditional *Dalits*' skills and enhancement of traditional musical instruments. Though, there is a number of provisions for *Dalits*' progress focusing on their traditional skills, yet there exists a

gap between the plans and the implementation. Negligence of upgrading *Dalits'* traditional occupations due to caste prejudices has an effect on the lives of millions preventing them from finding decent work, or even from freely entering certain occupations. The processes of marginalisation and exclusion destroy productive potential, and aggravate poverty and social tensions.

### *Dalits'* Occupations versus Development Paradigm

To find the solution the root of the problem has to be identified. So, why *Dalits* are so vulnerable? This can be explained using equity based approach to development. This approach is inspired and shares the principles and values of the right-based approach. Every individual must have the same opportunities. These are:

- access to economic, political, social and cultural resources;
- chance to develop their capabilities-possibility to advance according to the variety of people's needs and aspirations;
- possibility to participate in the development of their communities, in other words, to be recognised as a valuable member of the community, having rights and being respected;
- possibility to benefit from development programmes and sharing of wealth.

Further, this approach requires the following conditions to be fulfilled: i) the understanding and recognition of the phenomenon of social exclusion and gender inequalities; ii) the identification of social inequalities by analysing gender and social relations; iii) the identification of gender and social exclusion issues; iv) the promotion of necessary social changes to achieve equity and equality; v) the empowerment of women and other disadvantaged people; and vi) the promotion of social inclusion (CECI,2006).

*Human Right to Livelihood* is one of the fundamental aspects of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This declaration states that all people have the right to fulfilling, dignified livelihood and basic labour protection. The human right of all persons to fulfilling livelihood includes the following universal, indivisible, interconnected and interdependent human rights: i) the human right to work and receive wages that contribute to an adequate standard of living; the human right to a standard of living adequate for well-being, health and life; the human right to freedom of association; the human right to protection from forced labor; the human right to adequate, safe working conditions; the human right to reasonable limitation of working hours, rest and leisure; the human right to education and access to information, including vocational training; the human right to freedom from discrimination based on race, sex, or any other status, in all aspects of work, including hiring and promotion; the human right to equal pay for equal work; the human right to equal pay to equal work; the human right to equal access to productive resources including land, credit, and technology; and the human right to unemployment protection and social security (PODHRE,2002). Above presented *Dalit* occupations are not in line with the framework of international human rights standards. In fact, *Dalit* human rights have been violated since very beginning. That is why *Dalits* are synonymous of poor, excluded, deprived, marginalised and disadvantaged.

### Conclusion

Traditional artisans are a part of the culture of the Nepalese society. Their expertise is fast disappearing though due to unfavorable environment and only few are still dependant on their craftsmanship for their subsistence. The craftsmen are not in position to compete in the open market. The structure of the Nepalese society, especially caste system and existing power relations are responsible for disappearing of traditional caste based occupations. As *Dalits* have neither social nor economic power they are trapped in patron-client type of relations to varying degree. Nexus of all these results in negative effect on economic status, livelihood, participation in public life, caste based discrimination and violation of human rights. *Dalits* have been confined to *Dalits* caste based occupations to serve the whole Nepalese society

from very beginning and they could not enhance or develop their access to land which is not only a productive asset but it is a source of social and economic power, symbol of prestige and prosperity in agrarian society. Most of educated *Dalit* youth perceive that caste based discrimination and untouchability is strongly associated with their occupations and they do not want to continue their ancestors' professions. There is an ongoing debate about whether to modernise *Dalits'* caste based occupations or not. Though there are a number of the state's efforts for overall socioeconomic empowerment of marginalised communities the *Dalits'* rights have been continually violated. *Dalits'* poverty – human, economic and structural is a direct result of the caste system and subsequent social exclusion. The equity based approach to development and international human rights standards are not emphasising enough socioeconomic security of *Dalit* community in the Nepalese context.

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