



Social exclusion in Darjeeling Hills: A sociological study

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Abstract

This paper would focus on the concept of social exclusion on the basis of caste in Darjeeling Hills. The Darjeeling hills is located in the Eastern Himalayas comprising of diverse population on the lines of caste, race, class and ethnicity. It would be interesting to understand the phenomenon of social exclusion caste in a hill society, how exclusion still remains important in understanding social relations and interactions.

Keywords: Social exclusion, scheduled caste, Darjeeling

Introduction

The district of Darjeeling is located in the northern west of West Bengal, India, and is bordered to the north by Sikkim, to the east by Bhutan, and to the west by Nepal. Its population is believed to be a single, compact people made up of several ethnic groups, including caste Hindu and Indo-Mongoloid tribes. Each of these groups has its own dialect and sub-dialect, which supports the idea that Indians in Nepal are homogeneous due to their shared use of the Nepali language. However, the caste system has historically served as the foundation for the social structure among Nepali communities. Also the process of sanskritization had been underway since the middle of the 1800s. The idea of homogenizing ethnic groups into one identity on the basis of language is not a new phenomenon.

In response to the people's growing campaign for independent statehood, the federal government is seeking to provide 11 hill-tribe villages scheduled tribe status in order to help them find a permanent political solution. Due to this standing, the tagadharis—men of holy thread, or higher caste groups—have been forced to compete with their matwali, or tribesmen, for tribal status.

The issue becomes more complex when the scheduled caste of the area is ignored and such measures marginalize the discrimination and exclusion they face on a daily basis. When society continues to hold onto long-standing caste-based prejudices, such policies condemn caste as a component of the social structure and its role in social inequality. The three main Dalit communities—Damai, Kami, and Sarki—will be the subject of this study, which will also examine how caste continues to construct and reproduce discourses of power.

The concept of social exclusion

The topic of exclusion sparked a heated controversy in France during the 1960s. The individuals mentioned, including politicians, activists, officials, journalists, and academics, used the phrase "les exclus" to refer to the impoverished. It is credited to Rene Lenoir, the Secretary of State for Social Action in the Chirac Government, who is said to have coined the term "the excluded" in 1974 (Silver, 2014). Therefore, social exclusion refers to the systematic lack of resources or social connections that an individual or household endures, resulting in their isolation from the

broader community or society. In India, the institution of caste practices the most exact type of social exclusion, exerting control over the socio-economic life of the Scheduled Castes (Subramanyam and Sekhar, 2010). According to Chakraborty (2014), social exclusion becomes unavoidable when individuals or communities experience a sequence of crises such as unemployment, discrimination, low income, and inadequate housing. According to Thorat (2008), social exclusion is a term used in social science to describe the processes by which certain groups are completely or partially prevented from fully participating in the society they reside in. In the Indian context, the issues surrounding the prejudice faced by Scheduled Castes are intricately linked to the mechanisms of exclusion based on caste and ethnicity. Hence, the present study employs the idea of social exclusion to comprehend the specific form of exclusion experienced by the group under investigation. When the phrase 'social' is employed, it typically refers to something that is connected to society and its structure. If we define society as a mechanism for facilitating a structured communal existence, then exclusion refers to the act of being deprived of participation in that structured existence. The structured existence of a community encompasses various elements, specifically work, education, public services, benefits and institutions, political and civil involvement, access to resources, and the ability to make decisions. Being excluded from any aspect of community life can result in segregation and poverty. Therefore, if segregation resulted in the division of the group according to their caste, race, tribe, area, gender, disability, etc., exclusion prevented individuals from participating in the organised social structure of the community (Chakraborty, 2014). Thus, within the realm of social science, the fundamental characteristics of social exclusion align with the primary indicators of social exclusion, which are closely linked to social discrimination, inequitable access to rights, uneven distribution of power, and disparities.

The paper has formulated ideas from other intellectuals, including Sen (2000) ^[17], who emphasised different aspects and unique characteristics of social exclusion. Sen made a distinction between adverse exclusion and adverse inclusion. Unfavourable exclusion refers to the purposeful exclusion or omission of certain individuals from participation in social activities against their will, often

under unfavourable conditions. Adverse inclusion refers to the act of forcibly including those who were previously excluded, but under adverse conditions. Social exclusion can be further categorised into two distinct aspects: constitutive relevance and instrumental importance. Constitutive relevance, as he defines it, refers to the state in which a person is unable to establish connections with others and engage in communal activities. However, he believes that instrumental importance does not cause deprivation directly, but rather might result in deprivation by denying social and economic opportunities that would have otherwise facilitated inclusion. In addition, Sen has underscored the significance of both active and passive exclusion. Active exclusion refers to the intentional exclusion of individuals from opportunities due to government policies, while passive exclusion occurs through social processes where there are no deliberate efforts to exclude but may still result in people being excluded from certain circumstances (Sen, 2000; Kadun and Gadkar, 2014) ¹⁷. Kabeer (2000) emphasised that various forms of exclusion and inclusion lead to the division of society, which can be categorised as privileged and secondary inclusion. Privileged inclusion refers to those who hold a central position in society and possess the ability to shape the establishment of rules and norms, hence playing a crucial role in decision-making processes, as stated by Kabeer (2000).

Caste structure in Darjeeling

To comprehend the caste system in Darjeeling, it is crucial to consider the historical context of Nepal. According to Sharma (1978), the Mulki Ain (Civil Code) in 1854 introduced a classification system for Nepali society, based on caste and ethnic group, which consisted of four categories. He said that the social realm is comprised of Car Varna Chattis Jat, which signifies the existence of four varnas and thirty-six castes, including Tagadhari, Matwali, Pani Na Calne Choi Chito Halnu Na Parne, and Pani Na Calne Choi Chito Halnu Parne. Starting in the early 19th century, there was a progressive rise in the population of upper-caste Brahmins and Chettri from Nepal, which played a role in the expansion of Hinduism in Darjeeling (Bomjan, 2008). The Nepali community assimilated social practices from Nepal upon migration. The society was structured hierarchically, with caste traditions deeply ingrained in its social fabric. More precisely, the society was excessively inflexible and bound by tradition. Similar to Nepal, the Nepali community in Darjeeling also had a hierarchical caste system that continues to exist today. However, in Darjeeling, the caste structure is separated into four divisions instead of the five broad castes found in Nepal, making it distinct. In his study, Pakhrin (2013) examined the four divisions of the caste system in Darjeeling, which closely resembled those in Nepal. These divisions included the Brahman caste, which comprised individuals with surnames such as Upadhyay, Sharma, Dahal, Upreeti, and so on. Kshatriyas comprised the Chettri and Newar communities, among others. The Vaisyas, such as Gurung, Mangar, Tamang, Subba, Rai, and others, are fond of. Finally, Sudras consist of Kami, Damai, and Sarki. The Kami, Damai, and Sarki belong to the lower castes and are engaged in certain hereditary occupations. The Kami are involved in the traditional occupation of blacksmithing, the Damai are involved in tailoring and music, and the Sarki are

involved in shoemaking. The current population of Darjeeling is 1, 846, 823, with the Scheduled Castes population being 317,275, which makes up 17.18 percent of the total population of the district. Among the Scheduled Castes population, the Kami, Damai, and Sarki communities have a total population of 84, 110, accounting for 4.55 percent (according to the Census of India 2011).

The Darjeeling Hills region is characterised by its diverse population, encompassing various ethnicities, languages, faiths, and cultures. The region is inhabited by the Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalis, and plainsmen, including Bengalis, Biharis, and Marwaris. Currently, the communities of Kami, Damai and Sarki are classified as Scheduled Castes within the Nepali community in Darjeeling. Looking back, when the Reservation Policy circular was issued in 1950 across India, the three communities of Darjeeling, namely Kami, Damai, and Sarki, were not included in the reservation category. As a result, these communities formed an association in 1956 to seek recognition as Scheduled Castes and avail government benefits as per the Indian Constitution. As a result, they were included in the category and became entitled to access the reservation facilities (Ramudamu, 2001).

Conclusion

Despite being outlawed by the constitutions of the majority of South Asian nations, caste-based discrimination yet exists in various forms. Originally, the jajmani system governed social ties between various caste groups, and caste served as a mechanism for the division of work. The caste system has become more localized and diverse as a result of the demise of the jajmani system and the rise in the diversity of livelihoods. A change in the mentality around caste-based occupations has been facilitated by occupational diversification beyond the traditional orthodox line. Today the emphasis on pollution, purity, and ritual hierarchy is one of the weaker aspects of caste.

Dumont, Hutton, Ghurye, and numerous other academics once believed that caste was a comprehensive system that covered the entire community. Caste still exists today, albeit not in its entirety. Group hierarchies, limitations on food and social interactions, benefits and disadvantages amongst the various parts, restricted job options, and marriage restrictions no longer have strong or flexible legal foundations. Marriage laws have always been ambiguous. Inter- and intra-caste relations have changed as a result of a shift in the foundation for caste difference. Caste identification is now a tool used to organize individuals for political and economic advancement. There have been changes in the caste system from ritual definitions of roles to identity politics, from ascribed and designated status to negotiated positions of power.

In summary, caste has a convoluted history and persists in various forms to this day. The way caste functions as a symbol of collective identity and a foundation for collective bargaining of scarce resources and participation in various political groups and administrative institutions is one of the most prominent and potent characteristics of caste. In India, between the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Classes, and among Nepali society, between the Brahmin Chhetris, Janjatis, and Dalits, these political objectives have frequently resulted in the formation of new identity coalitions. While the caste system was being undermined at the ceremonial ritual level, it has been

reshaped and was resurrected as the politics of difference at the political and economic levels.

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