

SOCIAL MOBILITY OF SHILPKARS IN UTTARAKHAND 1815-1947

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ABSTRACT

Indian Society did not remain static as was assumed by some authors. Society was dynamic and so was the caste system. For a long caste system was also thought to have remained changeless. But recent work point out that even caste system did not remain as a fourfold varna system. There was proliferation of castes right from Gupta period down to the present times. Uttarakhand society was not divided into four broad caste categories. But we will find that only three social categories were prevalent. By using the historical and anthropological methods this article tries to chart the social mobility of Shilapakars in Uttarakhand and the ways and methods, such as Sacred Thread (Janeo) and Dola - Palki as markers of higher status, they chose to achieve social mobility.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Proliferations, Shilpkar, Sanskritization

Recent works have discussed the popularization of the term and a new movement which challenged all form of social hierarchies and distinctions. The way Dalit identity has been constructed and articulated conveys the exact anger and frustration on the part of the socially excluded communities of Indian society vis-à-vis the repressive caste system. These protest are not something linked only to the contemporary political developments, rather they assumed various forms in different periods of history and always challenged the dominant cultural discourse creating an alternative past giving the socially marginalized an honorable place in history (Rajasekhar Basu, 2017).

Social theorists, of late, have differed in their views over the blatant and blanket usage of the term 'Dalit' which too often has ignored the patterns of differentiation that exist among them. There are

others who argue that the category Dalit enables scholars to highlight the large-scale discrimination and injustice faced by section of humanity in the name of caste and jati ordering. In fact, Dalit is not a caste, but rather a constructed identity. Nonetheless, this new identity helps the socially and economically discriminated groups to challenge the processes that have led to their centuries-old subordination (Bharati, Sunita Reddy, 2002).

The Dalit movement is not a homogenous one. It has lot of regional variations. The efforts to recover a past that is seldom presented in dominant historiographical scholarship have been a major intellectual investment for contemporary scholars interested in a more critical understanding of the past through the interpretation of history, literature and religion. This is the reason why Jyotirao Phule and other Dalit intellectuals rejected the

construction of Aryan migration theory to restore the lost respectability of the *Shudras* and *Ati-Shudras*. This search continued with Iyothee Thass and B.R. Ambedkar who were responsible for an alternative discourse, negating the primacy given to the Brahmanical traditions in the writing of Indian religious history (Ibid.).

The social structures of Kumaun and Garhwal are similar. The largest ethnic group is Khasa or Khasiya who comprised the traditional peasantry and the next largest ethnic group are Doms who served the cultivating body as artisans and farm servants. Numerically the smallest but ritually the highest are the Thuljat-Brhmins and Rajputs who claimed to be descendents from the plains. The three-tiered structure-Thuljat/Khasa/Dom emerged out of what were originally distinctions between ruler and the ruled. The structure can be conceptualized as a series of binary distinctions of which the basic oppositions were i) Bith (clean) vs. Dom (unclean) and within Bith, Thuljat (immigrant) vs. Khasa (indigenous) (Ramachandra Guha, 2008). Before the arrival of the British, Khasa and Tuljat castes dominated economically, socially and politically.

It was widely believed that the Doms were original inhabitants who were conquered and enslaved by the *Khasas* (William Crooke, 2005). He opined that Doms in Himalayan districts of the province were the descendents of Dasyus of Vedic times). The Khasas in turn were subjugated by the later immigrants from the plains who came to hold both political power and ritual status. The geographical isolation of the hill tracts developed an ambiguous relation with Hinduism. Therefore, caste restrictions and other rules of orthodox Hinduism were singularly lax. With regard to the Dom outcastes, ritual rules of purity and pollution were not defined as exclusively as in the plains. Mostly artisan and tenants formed an integral part of the village community like Bajgis and Aujis (Ibid)

Historically, the shilpkar community had been a part of local village community as rest of India. The word Shilpkar did not denote caste but was used for the community engaged in different

occupation such as : craftsmen, technician, architect, musician communities of the region. They actually constituted the artisan class and in fact were also collectively referred to as Shilpkar. This community is supposed to be the descendents of the aboriginals of the hills(S.S.Negi, 2011).

The dalits like aujis, darjis, lohar, koli, teli, tamta, dhuar, badi, koltam mistru, roria, kevat, dom, kurakia, od etc. are the original inhabitants of the hills. Other dalit castes like valmikis and mochis (chamars) have migrated from nearby places of Uttar Pradesh (Vivek kumar, 2001). In fact, Atkinson divided doms into four categories: First group consisted of Koli, Tamta and Lohar; second group had Ruria, Agri, Pahari, Bhoor and Chimyar ; the third category consisted of chamar, Mochi and Bhukhuriya and the fourth had Beri, Hudakiya and Dholi. The dalit communities suffered a lot of indignities and landlessness and poverty.

MOBILITY AND CONTESTATION

Scant resources on the social structure and relations during precolonial period make it difficult to reconstruct them for this period. Account of early colonial administrators, travelogues and some local histories help of us to draw a picture of the society in colonial period. The three tiered structure evolved through historical process. Many opined that the Doms were the earliest settlers in the region. Doms were subdued by the Khasas, a powerful tribe who established their rule. Khasas, in turn, were conquered by the Rajput immigrants from the plains who set up the Chand dynasty in Kumaun and the Panwar dynasty in Garhwal some time between 10th and 14th centuries. Their rule continued until they were defeated by the Gurkhas. Finally, the region came under the British from 1814 onwards. During the rule of these dynasties many Brahmin and Rajputs migrated to these regions. Therefore, these conquests and immigration flows played an important role in the evolution of the social structure of the region.

Thuljats considered themselves superior to the Khasas and the Doms. This was embedded in

their strict observation of religious practices and case rules. Thuljats sought to confirm to the practice of orthodox Hinduism while Khasas and Doms could not be accommodated within it. Thuljats put on Janeo (sacred thread) which distinguished them from Khasas. Dominance of Thuljats and the ritual practices that sustained it was maintained through politico-legal sanctions. The Khasas and the Doms could be punished for wearing Janeo. Violations of caste rules was punished by an important official of the court named Dharmadhikari. Trail wrote that Doms were given capital punishment for violating caste rules. Caste superiority and dominance was perpetuated through political power.

But with the changes under British rule, caste and status were separated to some extent education became the new symbol of status. English education became essential to secure government service. Initially there were few jobs under the British but by the end of the 19th century when the bureaucracy expanded the British required large numbers of English educated natives to man the subordinate offices. For many people these subordinate services symbolized prestige. Securing English education became important. Schools were opened in various parts of the hills. Almora, the centre of Kumaun elite, emerged as important centre of education (M.S. Randhawa, 1970, M.M. Dhasmana, 1987). Later schools were opened in other parts like Nainital, Pauri, Srinagar (Garhwal) etc.

The *Thuljats* claimed a major share in the government services and various professions and also dominated the political leadership. They played a crucial role in local administration and perpetuated their caste supremacy by helping their caste brethren. Thus although the pre-colonial monopoly of the *Thuljats* on politics and administration was broken, they still maintained the power by availing new opportunities.

While the colonial state used this information to serve its own purpose in the society it generated tensions. People were asked to identify

themselves within the given categories. The categories were changed over time as diversity defied simple classification (Rashmi Pant, 1987). People had a wide range of overlapping identities. Since they were asked about their caste and religion it led to self-questioning. The classification was not just of the individual respondent but of the group to which he belonged. This led to claims and counter claims for change in caste status and the formation of the caste associations (Bernard S. Cohn, 1987).

Census was one way of securing status. Various other practices were adopted to ensure mobility. Adopting the customs and the way of life of a higher caste was a common practice. The Kumaun Rajput Parishad which was dominated by the *Khasas* exhorted members to emulate higher castes. They were asked to follow the orthodox rituals to justify claims to higher status (R.D., Sanwal, 1976). Turner found that Khasas were putting *on janeo* and were raising themselves to the rank of Rajputs. In the same way Doms of Uttrakhand were also on the path to mobility. One way of doing this was through Arya Samaj.

The founder of Arya Samaj was Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83), came from a Samvehi Audich Brahman of Kathiawad in Gujarat. He developed an ritual in late nineteenth century in order to regain those Indians who were lost to other religions. This activity was necessitated because of census reports from 1872 onwards. It was thought that Hindu religion was under demographic threat. Therefore, there was need to go for counter proselytisation through shuddhi. *Shuddhi*- a rite to remove ritual pollution- has been central to the Hindu tradition. It provided a means through which transgressors can be assimilated back into their caste and religion. It was often applied, in nineteenth century, for high caste Hindus who were considered to have incurred ritual pollution by travelling outside India. In 1877, Dayananda Saraswati deployed the idea in a new to reclassify a Punjabi Sikh turned Hindu turned Christian as an 'Arya'. He took this measure as there a lot of conversions in Punjab during previous years. After his death, his followers institutionalized the

ceremony with a series of conversions of individual Christians and Muslims (David Hardiman, 2007).

An initial rite was evolved (usually administered by orthodox Brahman priests) with a bath in the Ganges at Hardwar. Many Arya Samajists considered such holy immersions to be reek of old superstitions and in the 1890's supposedly 'pure' Vedic ceremony was concocted with a *havan* (sacred fire), a lecture on the Gayatri and principles of the Arya Samaj, a shaving of the head, an investiture of the holy thread where appropriate, and a final distribution of sweets by the convert to all present (Ibid.) Soon the Arya Samaj started acting as a national organization to counter missionaries.

SACRED THREAD (*JANEQ*) AND *DOLA* - *PALKI* AS MARKERS OF HIGHER STATUS

After the establishment of the colonial rule in this region Christian missionaries also became active in the conversion of lower castes to their religion. Swami Dayananda Saraswati started visiting the hills of Kumaun and Garhwal from 1874. Doms also struggled to improve their status. He started propagating Arya Samaj doctrine among the shilpakars of Uttarakhand. As some sub-castes of shilpakars were planning to convert to Christianity, Arya Samaj started working vigorously among them. The usual rite of purification (*shuddhi*) which was done to reconvert Hindus who converted to Christianity and Islam. But in Uttarakhand they used it to bring about social status of shilpakars. Arya Samaj started purifying shilpakars and started investiture ceremony for them with sacred thread (Naval Viyogi and M.Anwar Ansari, 2010). Arya Samaj opposed conversion. In this connection, Lala Iajpat Rai visited Sunika village of Nainital district on the day of Baishakhi 1913 to participate on the shilpakars purification ceremony on the invitation of Khushi Ram and gave *Janeq* and *dwija* status to nearly 600 hundred Doms. Thereafter, editors of local news papers also started in terms of reforming shilpakars (S.S.Negi, 2011). Doms also asserted that they

should be called Shilpkar (Resolution of the Garhwal Shilpkar Sabha, 6 June 1931). Tamtas (copper smiths) who became rich took to priestly function amongst shilpkars (Sanwal, year). The Kumaun Shilpkar Sabha and the Garhwal Shilpkar Sabha spearheaded the movement for status mobility. As expected this move created a flutter among caste Hindus. Traditionally, shilpakars were not allowed to wear *janeq*. When shilpakars started to wear after *shuddhi* rite by Arya Samaj, there was opposition and reaction against this new move.

Arya Samaj started working among shilpakars under the leadership of Jayanand Bharat, Khushi Ram, Bacchi Ram and Baldev Singh Arya etc. Dogadda and Bironkhal were developing as cultural centres for Shilpakars. Along with sacred thread, now shilpakars wanted to use *Dola Palki* in their marriage ceremonies which were not allowed earlier. During the marriage of Doms the bridegrooms and brides were not allowed by the higher castes to use *dola* and *palki* (*palki* was used to carry the bridegroom and *dola* the bride. Both *dola* and *palki* were carried by 2 to 4 persons on their shoulders) and were instead to walk on foot. When Doms asserted their right to use *dola-palki* there was often violence. The Arya Samaj played an important role in the movement. On January 16, 1920, at Ramgarh village in Kumaon a shilpkar marriage ceremony procession was organised with *dola-palki* under the leadership of Khushi Ram Arya. There was opposition to this from the village. Jayanand Bharati initiated *dola-palki* in Garhwal. In 1923, a marriage party of shilpakars with *dola palki* from village Khandi was going to Sendhikal, they were prevented and *baratis* were beaten (S.S.Negi, 2011). He actually talks about a number of instances where caste Hindus attacked marriage parties of shilpakars and shilpakars and were beaten and *dola-palkis* were set to fire. For more details, please see his article).

While *Khasas* could merge with Rajputs, Doms could not do so. They were considered impure, and there were no middle caste groups in the hills with whom they could identify. Thus their struggle did not result in mobility in caste hierarchy.

However, an internal structure of hierarchy emerged within the Doms. Tamtas emerged as leaders of the Kumaun Shilpkar Sabha. Only a few Doms could benefit in terms of their improved position. For many the situation changed little (Randhawa 1970).

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