

Deprivation, Poverty And Caste Emancipation: Nat Community In Bihar

Md Moshabbir Alam

Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations,
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Abstract: This paper deals with understanding the conditions of Nat community with respect to their poverty, inequality, caste emancipation and social exclusion in Paschim Champaran, Bihar. The methodology adopted for this research was participant observation, survey method and interview schedule. Nat, a nomad community is primarily involved in singing, rope dancing and juggling. H. H. Risley and R. V. Russell demonstrate that this marginalized community has multiculturalism as an important aspect of their society. The conditions of Marginalized sections in the wake of Globalization have been discussed in detail in recent years by Dr Davindera, Manjur Ali, R. C. Swarankar, Ali Anwar and Linda E Lucas. However, these scholars have not taken into account the condition of their marginalization, discrimination, untouchability and deprivation of education belonging to Nat community in Bihar in contemporary times. This paper brings into discussion the aspects of their deprivation of basic amenities, untouchability and social exclusion which constitutes the foundation of their backwardness in contemporary times.

Historically, they are acrobats and they were traditionally patronized by the Rajput rulers. Nats were especially invited by the Jagirdars for celebrations related to child birth, marriage and on other special occasions. After a passage of time and due to some factors, these skills have not been seen relevant to the contemporary society. This community has slowly shifted from being mere entertainers and now acts as rickshaw pullers, contractual animal husbandry and agricultural labourers. They are illiterate and no facility for health care. Poverty makes them alienated from main stream society. Now, they are socially excluded and compelled to hand to mouth existence in Bihar The enrolment ratio of Nat children is worst in schools and Madarsas in Paschim Champaran. The miserable socio-economic conditions faced by the Nat community on the one hand and the religious and socio-cultural fabrics of the upper castes do not want the empowerment of Nats.

Keywords: Nat, Poverty, Deprivation, Inequality, Exclusion, Mechanical Solidarity

I. INTRODUCTION

A nomadic community named Nat is found in North India, mainly in Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttrakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal and Nepal. This community has different identities in various states on the basis of religion, region and socio-cultural practices. Basically, they fall under lower stratified category in social system. According to census report of India, 1981, the total population of Nats in Rajasthan was 23,235 and they speak Hindi and bagri (local dialect). In Punjab, Nat population is 466 out of which 245 are males and

221 females, and they are residing in distributed areas of Ferozpur and Patiala districts of Punjab. There are smaller numbers of Nat community who are living in Chandigarh and Himachal Pradesh, their population being 21 and 232 respectively and are classified as Scheduled Caste. In Madhya Pradesh, their population is 44,127 where it is considered that they are migrated from Uttar Pradesh. In Bihar, their population is 24,897; they speak Hindi, Bhojpuri and Magahi. In West Bengal, their population is 3,376 and they speak Bengali. Bengali Nat community is known as Natta, meaning skilled and proficient in music and dances.

Ramesh Chand Swarankar has identified that Nat community is a vagrant gypsy tribe, who led a nomadic life for much of their history. As highlighted by W Crooke, the problem of the origin of Nats and their ethnological affinities are most perplexing. The meaning of Nat in Sanskrit is a dancer or nachaniya, this term became popular with acrobatic skills. W Crooke says that Nats are a tribe of so called gypsy dancers, acrobats and prostitutes scattered in many parts of Indian states. H H Rizley informs that Nar or Nat or Natakis form a dancing and musician class of Eastern Bengal, while Dr Wise has identified them with Brahminical Kathak of Hinduism, mainly on the strength of a tradition that they first came to Dacca in the days of Nawabs. Herbert H Rizley has also talked about Nats in the Eastern Bengal that the modern Nats are not satisfied with this pedigree but claim to be the offspring of sage Bharadawaj and a dancing girl. R V Russell opines that a considerable section, if not majority of Nats, really belongs to the Kanjar or Bedia, a gypsy caste, who may have them originated from the Doms. European anthropologist Rose adds that the Nat is a typical gypsy caste in Punjab, like gypsy tribe of Europe and is synonymous to Bazigar in general parlance.

The origin of Nat community is highly debatable but Indian sociologists and anthropologists like B Lohiya, K S Singh, Dr. Davindera, M A Sherring and R C Swarankar consider Nats as a gypsy tribe and traditionally associated with acrobatics skills and sometimes begging. R C Swarankar has analyzed the reason of their backwardness that they do not have adopted modern skills according to time and space, and this is considered as one of the factors that hinders their assimilation with society according to changing patterns of modern society.

II. UNDERSTANDING DEPRIVATION, POVERTY AND CASTE EMANCIPATION AMONG NAT COMMUNITY

This community faces financial problems, acute poverty, untouchability and socially excluded in contemporary times in Bihar. The Nat community is totally cut off from other communities. It has been seen that this community rarely has any interactions with the other communities. Due to their poor living and being lower castes, they are not given social respect and frequently abused and beaten in their locality (Paschim Champaran). They have been seen alienation from main stream society. It has been observed that they have different identities and they follow multiple religions at the same time. They follow Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and other sects, especially Sufism. It has been said that they have guru system, whose name is Shah Madar as Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi has discussed in his work 'A History of Sufism in India, Vol-1'. But most of Nats in Bihar are not aware of Shah Madar. They do not have any hard rules for following any particular religion. They follow the rituals of Hinduism as also perform Namaz, attend the Mazars of the Pirs (Sufis). They not only participate in Muslim festivals but also festivals of other religions and faith.

Nat community residing in Nat Mohallah, Paschim Champaran, Bihar is about fifty-four families. These families

broadly practice Hinduism and Islam. During the field surveys, it was observed that they have faith in both religions. They do not make any differences to either of the religions. They celebrate all Indian festivals with enthusiasm. They perform namaz and keep fasts in the month of Ramadhan. On the other side they also celebrate festivals of Hinduism i.e. Holi, Durga Puja, Chhat Puja, Deepawali etc. It is therefore difficult to attribute any particular religion to them. Another important characteristic of this community is their adoption of traditions of all the religions particularly Hinduism and Islam. They do not make any differences to choose the names of their children, which can be found in Islam and Hinduism. It has been noticed that Nats have some similar kind of Hindu and Muslim sounding names in Nat Mohallah village, Sathi and the same are written on their documents like Voter card, Aadhar, Card Ration card, etc. They do not believe in particular names. A Mohammad can have his children named Krishna and Rubi while Krishna can have daughter named Sameena and Sulatana. As far as their living style is concern, they follow the traditions and culture of both religions. During field work, it was observed that Nat Women sport sindoors and follow the traditions of Hindus but on any festivals, they maintain fasts on Navratra but also fast during the month of Ramdhan. They receive the money of Zakat in Ramadhan. They perform the namaz of Eid-ul-fitr (Eid) and Eid-ul-Adha (Bakrid).

This village (Nat Mohallah, Paschim Champaran) has 67 families. Apart from Nat Community, other communities/groups also live there. In all, the population of Nats are about three hundred. Nat Mohallah, Paschim Champaran has compositions of families of Muslims, Yadav, Brahmins as dominant caste and Nats as lower castes. The caste composition of this village has been shown below (see the table-1 and figure-1). Though, Nats are in majority in this village, they are also economically backward and landless. They are looked down upon as they have no resources. In the village list they do not match as they are neither considered Hindus nor Muslims because they do not fall under one particular religion.

Name of Castes	Number of Families
Nat	54
Dewan (Shah)	04
Muslim Dhobi	03
Hindu Kumhar	03
Hindu Mehtar	01
Brahman	02
Total number of families	67

Table 1: Caste Composition of Nat Mohallah

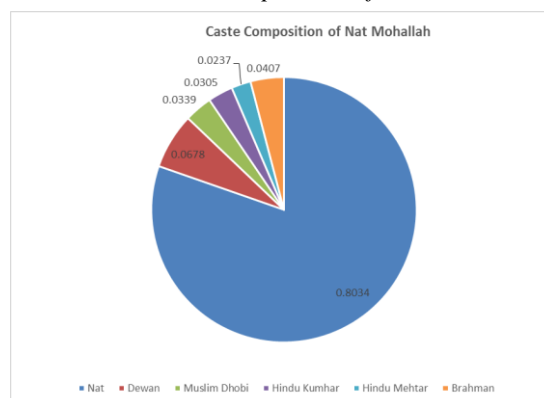


Figure 1

Their social status is not high due to poverty, lower caste status and low standard of living. Normally, women in Pashchim Champaran don't work and as Nat women are open to work, they are looked down upon. In a region where women are supposed to cover from head to toe, Nat women go and do the work of tattooing, maid and folk dances. The Nat women do not cover themselves with veil (Purdah) and are involved in economic activities. Practicing this, their women are considered as cheap in their character. Daily when they go to beg or work as domestic workers they have to face lot of comments for being 'beautiful'. Thus, Nat women become 'visible' to public and this visibility makes them and their young girls vulnerable to all those 'poachers' who do not consider them human beings. For marriage ceremony, Natanis (Nat Women) are invited for singing folk songs in villages. In their own village, Natanis gather in one place and sing songs together all over night. In such cases, it looks like a tribal society with a solid mechanical solidarity. They work together in ceremonies of child birth, marriage and festivals. It has been observed in this village that the women (Natani) have power control over the family system and are respected in their society. However, despite this, their conditions are appalling in contemporary times in Paschim Champaran, Bihar.

Nat community is observed as one of the most marginalized communities in India. They fall under the category of 'scheduled castes' according to the Constitution Order 1950 act. The villages they live in have never accepted them as integral part of their society. They are an absolutely landless community. Owing to their nomadic nature, they have continually moved to 'entertain' people and this perpetual mobility has resulted in their having different identities and religious pluralism. Where identity is considered as dynamic structure of social relationships, it changes its paradigm after a long period of time through agency. The word identities here are used for two purposes: first identities are constantly variable and renegotiable for a period of time and second, identities whether intentionally and unintentionally can shift the cage of religion, region, class and social identity. The shifting nature of identity indicates that identities are structural and it takes place through agency like region, religion, culture etc.

The economic conditions of this community are precarious. This is the primary reason for their backwardness and excluded from main stream society. Due to the availability of many new resources of entertainment like movies, mobile, television etc., their traditional acrobatic skills have lost their significance and seem less saleable in the contemporary society. Therefore, Nats are trying to shift to other professions like labourers, animal husbandry, begari (bonded labour) etc. In the Nat Mohallah of Paschim Champaran, based on participant observation, survey and interview schedule of the village, some data has been collected and it is related to adoption of new professions, which is given in Table-02 and Figure-02. It shows the details of professions of Nats living in Nat Mohallah, Paschim Champaran, Bihar. Table-02 shows that they are not adopting their traditional professions but other professions in order to sustain themselves.

Name of the profession	Number of People
Agricultural labourer	132
Construction labourer	42
Contractual Animal Husbandry	50
Begari	35
Rickshaw Puller	20
Others	16
Total	295

Table 2: Economic Activities of the Nats of Nat Mohallah

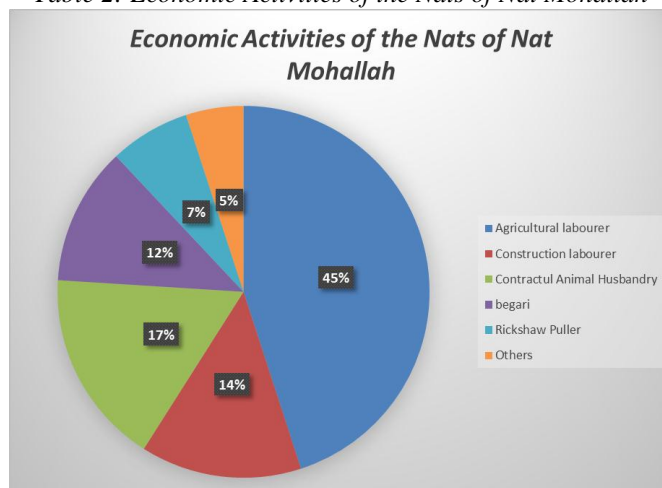


Figure 2

The socio-cultural practices of Nat community are observed multi-cultural society in this village in contemporary times, where they have assimilated themselves with all religions and cultures. They try to live a peaceful coexistence in the society. Rituals and sanctity play an important role in communication and in regulation of the systems in which people participate. It shows adaptation, acculturation, multiculturalism, regulation and control over society. Adaptation and acculturation are two processes adopted by Nats. Through adaptive changes in their own culture, structures, states and compositions, they maintain homeostasis among themselves in the short term environment fluctuation and long term structural changes in their environment.

III. CONCLUSION

The Nat community is considered one of the oldest nomadic communities of India. They are classified in schedule caste category with certain limitations under The Constitution (Schedule castes) Order, 1950. This community is seen as marginalized, socially excluded and compelled to lead a hand to mouth existence. Amartya Sen defines social exclusion as every kind of possibility contributing to making of deprivation and poverty.

Arjun Dangle's work *Poisoned Bread*, Jothanby Om Prakash Balmiki, *Murdhaya* by Prof Tulsi Ram, and other dalit narratives have expressed harrowing tales of humiliation, untouchability, exploitation and social exclusion in Indian society. Casteism is understood as an unchanging phenomenon of Indian society. Ram Manohar Lohiya expresses that caste was the primary medium of oppression. He recognized that all ill practices of Indian society have relation with Casteism. Ram Manohar Lohiya described

'caste' as an 'immobile class'. It has no features of dynamism and once an untouchable always remains an untouchable. But the effect of caste oppression, untouchability and social exclusion can be decreased by class, as discussed by Andre Betteille's work '*Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*'. Due to nature of rigidity, exploitation and social evils, many provisions have been introduced in the constitution of India to break the hegemony of Casteism and make Indian society as egalitarian society by the contribution of Dr B R Ambedkar.

However, Nat community is still facing poverty, untouchability and economically backward. They do not have enough resources to get the basic amenities like health facilities, education, water supply, electricity etc. The literacy rate is very low among Nat community. They are aware of the benefits of providing education to their children. Their economic conditions do not allow them to think about education. Due to poverty, their parents are forced to drive away their children from reading, writing and passing their examinations and their children find the easy work, which can be helpful to get food. The lack of education ultimately creates the problem of poverty, digital divide and unrefined socialization, which leads social exclusion from main stream society for this community. Dr. Davindera has analysed that the incidence of child labour is very much high in this community. The increasing cost of day-to-day and low level of income from their traditional professions have compelled the Natanis (Nat Women) to take up agriculture labour, paid domestic work in houses of the financially better. Unfortunately, Natanis can be found begging in other villages, on roads and religious places. It is difficult to say that the local governance and the government of Bihar have done anything concrete to render proper basic infrastructure, socialization,

education and uplifting from poor conditions of Natanis. It is high time to recognize the problems of Nat community and make policies for their empowerment not only in Bihar but also in other states.

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