

Interrogating Purity Versus Pollution: A Study of Select Indian Nepali Dalit Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper delineates and critically examines various perspectives regarding the notions of purity, pollution, hierarchical division of power and status within the Indian caste system through the analytical lens of contemporary Indian Nepali Dalit short stories *Bigreko Bahun* (1950) by Rup Narayan Sinha, *Bidambana* (2004) by Jit Bahadur Sunar and *Aaran* (2010) by Yuva Baral. The notions of purity and impurity are inherently relative constructs, whereby what is pure for one community may be impure for the other. The caste system perceives relative standing through the dichotomy of purity and impurity. According to the Hindu religious texts the Dalits are categorized as the most impure due to their profession as manual labourers, resulting in their social ostracism. This paper further investigates the manifestations of untouchability within the Nepali society, particularly concerning food contamination arising from the presence of a Dalit in the kitchen and associations of pollution linked to the deceased body of a Dalit.

Keywords: Purity, Pollution, Caste, Dalit, Nepali community

Introduction

Purity and pollution represent dual aspects of the same phenomenon, namely, the caste system inherent within Hindu society. The existence of one is inextricably linked to the presence of the other. The concept of caste, which is rooted in the ancient scripture *Manusmriti's* idea of karma, dharma and varna, has endlessly been upheld by the Hindus. Based on the notions of purity and pollution, these ideas evolved into a hierarchical society, with the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras being the four exclusively separated groups. The untouchables were not included in these varnas. These groups were arranged in a declining order of hierarchy, with the Brahmins at the top, followed by the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras along with the Untouchables at the bottom. The dichotomy of pure and impure serves as the foundational principle of this hierarchical structure, whereby individuals situated at the top benefit from the advantages conferred by purity, while those relegated to the lower strata of the social hierarchy bear the stigmas associated with impurity and pollution.

The basic contrast between the pure and the impure according to Louis Dumont in *Homo Hierarchicus* (1996) underlies all of the outward manifestations of a caste system, including hierarchy, isolation and division of work and provides them with their basic purpose. Based

on their ritual purity, castes are ranked; their contacts are restricted to protect the purity of the purer ones from the polluting influence of the impure; and separation of labour is intended to keep pure and impure occupations apart while also allowing impure occupations to preserve the purity of the pure ones. According to him, caste is a “hierarchical system, naturalised and legitimized by the Hindu religion and resting on the distinction between pure and impure” (7)

The Indian caste system epitomizes an ideal hierarchy, given that all constituents of the caste framework are ranked according to their degree of purity in relation to the purest entity- God. In contemporary India, the classification of certain castes as unclean, polluting and untouchable, resulting in their placement at the bottom of the hierarchical structure, has emerged as a matter of considerable concern for scholars and social reformers alike. People belonging to such castes were termed as Dalits which mean oppressed and exploited. The primary objective of this paper is to elucidate the severe discriminatory practices directed towards Dalits and their correlation with pollution. Additionally, this paper will examine how the concepts of purity and pollution are ingrained in the consciousness of individuals through an analysis of select Indian Nepali Dalit short stories.

Untouchability in the Nepali society

Untouchability in the Nepali society existed even before *Muluki Ain* (codified law of conduct) was established in 1854 in Nepal. The *Muluki Ain* categorized the Nepalis into five groups which comprised of the Tagadharis (the superior caste), the Enslavable and non-enslavable Matwali or alcohol consumers, impure but touchable and the impure but untouchable. In the Nepali community the Dalits are divided into three sub-castes: kami, damai and sarki also known as the *pani na chalnae jaat* (water unacceptable castes) or *achuut* (untouchable). They were deemed unworthy within all dimensions of social, political, economic and cultural mobility in the Nepali societal framework.

In the context of Nepali terminology, the term Dalit is literally interpreted as oppressed, trampled and annihilated. Individuals classified as Dalits are those who are denied the equal exercise of rights and privileges within the society, having been marginalized by the entrenched inequalities inherent in the caste and social hierarchy. For centuries, the Dalit population has endured a level of inhumane oppression and even in the contemporary twenty-first century the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas continue to regard Dalits as untouchables across social, religious, political and cultural domains. In the Indian Nepali society various social movements have emerged with the objective of eliminating such discriminatory practices against the underprivileged castes. Associations like The Gorkha Dalit Warg (1947) in Kurseong, All India Nepali Scheduled Caste Welfare Association (AINSCA) (1959) in Darjeeling, the All Sikkim Scheduled Caste Welfare Association (ASSCWA) (1994) in Gangtok and the Bharatiya Kami Unnayan Parishad (BKUP) (2017) in Kalimpong were formed with the sole purpose of eradicating caste-based segregation in the Nepali community. Despite the formation of such associations Dalit atrocity has continued to exist in the Nepali community which can be observed in cases brought forward in a Facebook channel by Samai Darpan in 2021. He has reported the case of one Puja Kalikotay, a teacher by profession in the Kurseong sub-division, belonging to the Dalit community who faced severe exclusion from the non-Dalits of the village when she visited a house of a deceased Brahmin on 19th October, 2021. When a complaint was filed against them, the village community responded by justifying their act as a preservation of their customs which should be respected by all. This reflects how the evils of caste system are still prevalent in the Indian Nepali society.

Discussion

Dalit literature emphasises on the representation of Dalits and their subjugation in the society in economic, social and cultural dimensions. As a manifestation of the artistic and linguistic expression of the atrocities endured by Dalits within society, Indian Nepali stories such as *Bigreko Bahun* (The Defiled Brahmin; 1950) by Rup Narayan Sinha, *Bidambana* (Irony; 2004) by Jit Bahadur Sunar and *Aaran* (Anvil; 2010) by Yuva Baral have explicitly illustrated the persistence of the practice of untouchability within Nepali society.

In traditional Hindu households, if an individual of higher caste was engaged in food preparation within the kitchen, they were deemed pure in contrast to other household members. Dalits were prohibited from even approaching the kitchen where upper-caste individuals were cooking, as their mere shadow was believed to render the food impure and consequently inedible (Shah). Such detrimental practices prevalent within Nepali society are meticulously depicted in *Aaran*, wherein Ramchandra, a blacksmith of the Kami community, attends a marriage ceremony of an upper caste family and the Brahmin women in the kitchen exert considerable effort to prevent his entry. Yuva Baral exposes the hypocrisy of the caste system and their approach towards the concept of purity and pollution where the lower castes (manual labourers) are not even allowed to enter the household of the upper castes, who are pure due to their close association with God, but the tools and utensils forged by the blacksmiths are used in their kitchens and temples.

The highest degree of impurity was ascribed to a deceased body and consequently all individuals connected with it, including those distantly related were regarded as highly impure and subject to social isolation (Shah). In *Bidambana*, Jit Bahadur Sunar explicitly underscores the concept of pollution associated with a deceased body, particularly when it pertains to a Dalit individual. The refusal of any Brahmin in the village to perform the last rites for Padambahadur Sunar, a Dalit, exemplifies the deeply entrenched belief that lower castes are impure and must not be touched. Although his life revolved around serving the community, even after three days of his death no Brahmin priest was willing to perform his last rites. The discrimination depicted in these narratives transcends mere fiction, having been observed in practice throughout history in the Nepali society, which necessitated the establishment of the *Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Anusoochit Jaati Sang* on January 23, 1913 in Darjeeling, primarily aimed at organizing funerals and cremation services for low caste groups, as the upper-caste community neither participated nor touched the remains of individuals belonging to the lower castes.

Each caste in the Indian society is ascribed to a hereditary vocation and specialization in accordance with the principles of the *Varna Parampara* (varna tradition). This stipulates that individuals within a particular group are compelled to adhere to the professions of their forebears, irrespective of the economic viability of such occupations. Consequently, the Brahmins are conventionally expected to engage in religious duties while the marginalized section of the society were compelled to take up manual labour like sweepers, scavengers, cobblers, barbers among others. In the Nepali community the kami, damai, sarki who are the lowest in the caste hierarchy, have been historically associated with professions such as blacksmithing, tailoring and cobbling respectively. The damai community also garnered recognition for playing musical instruments known as the *Naumati baja* in marriage

ceremonies. The kami community, acknowledged for their proficiency as blacksmiths created essential tools used for agriculture and household utensils. This difference in occupation to maintain caste purity is observed by Louis Dumont who says:

This opposition accentuates hierarchy, denoting the superiority of the pure over impure; it emphasises separation, as the pure and the impure must be distinctly segregated; and it highlights the division of labor, as occupations deemed pure and impure must also remain distinct. (137)

In *Aaran* Ramchandra expresses his anguish of living his life as a blacksmith as his ancestors left him no generational wealth except that anvil where he must forge metals every day to earn his living. He says:

Afna pita purkha bata sampatiko rup ma choridai ayeko tyo aaran cha, ti khasra haathharu ma hatiyaar banauney sip cha, kala haina. Shayad unko sanskriti tyahi aaran ho ki bhanthancha bela bhakhat. (That anvil is the only property left by my forefathers. These shriveled hands have the skill of making weapons not art. Maybe sometimes they think this is their only culture). (3)

It can be discerned that it is the manual labour performed by the lower castes that enables the upper castes to uphold their identity as a caste deemed pure. The inquiry regarding whether the Brahmins would be capable of maintaining this status in the absence of individuals to undertake the polluting tasks is question frequently posed by scholars and social reformers. From the inception, the human form has served as an emblem of the hierarchical structure prevalent in Indian society. The head has represented the highest varna, whereas the feet have represented the lowest. The concept of pollution transcends mere inter-caste relations. According to B.R. Ambedkar, “the idea of pollution has been attached to the institution of Caste, only because the Caste that enjoys the highest rank is the priestly Caste: while we know that priest and purity are old associates. We may therefore conclude that the idea of pollution is a characteristic of Caste only in so far as Caste has a religious flavour” (7).

The conviction that even deities may forfeit their sanctity through contact with contaminated religious entities and that such pollution incited divine retribution against the society elucidates the rationale behind the universal interest in preserving the purity of the Brahmins by adhering to the hierarchical social framework. Consequently, the cosmos has been conceptualized as divided into the pure and impure. *Bigreko Bahun* illustrates how association of the Brahmins to purity and the Dalits to impurity has rendered individuals to be empty-minded. When a young man belonging to a Brahmin caste assists an elderly woman of a subordinate caste to cross a turbulent stream, the upper caste society not only questions him on his act of service but also ostracizes him from the community. The narrative reveals the irony inherent in the caste system and underscores the fragile boundary separating the pure from the impure as evidenced by the immediate labelling of a Brahmin as impure upon touching an untouchable. The discourse surrounding purity is inherently complex, characterized by a significant variance in interpretation, prompting inquiries into the true definition of purity and impurity. The dichotomy encapsulating the notions of purity and pollution is problematized through these narratives, wherein the supposedly pure Brahmin is rendered impure the instant he/she engages with a Dalit, thereby exposing the hypocrisy and contentious nature of the caste system.

Conclusion

It is widely held that the caste segregation within Nepali society is less stringent than that observed in other Indian states; however, this categorization of castes into *thulo jaat* (high caste) and *syano jaat* (low caste) represents a discriminatory practice that persists within Nepali society. It is observed that an exclusionary attitude is shown towards individuals of lower caste status when inquiries regarding the *jaat* (caste) arise during public gatherings. Inter-caste marriages remain intolerable within upper-caste households and the physical and psychological abuse of low-caste individuals who marry into high-caste families continue to be prevalent in the Nepali community. The admission of Dalits into upper-caste households, particularly within their kitchens is still met with disdain.

Such discriminatory practices in the Nepali community have been meticulously examined and articulated by writers such as Rup Narayan Sinha, Jit Bahadur Sunar and Yuva Baral and their literary contributions substantiate the assertion that caste segregation remains entrenched in the Nepali societal framework. Furthermore, despite the emergence of Dalit consciousness through various social reform initiatives and literary discourses, caste-based discrimination continues to persist within the fabric of Nepali society.

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