

# The *Riti-Bhagya* System in Western Nepal : Farmers and Artisans, Caste and Gender

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## INTRODUCTION

This study examines the nature of the ties that bind low-caste people to high-caste people in a rural agrarian community in far western Nepal called Bhalara. Bhalara is the seat of a former kingdom located in Bajhang District of the Seti Zone. The former kingdom was one of many such lineage-based ruling principalities in Nepal that enjoyed varying degrees of sovereignty and that figure importantly in local people's concepts of politics and government. From the advent of nationalist unification of Nepal in the mid-1950's to the present democratic era, the material base of traditional intercaste *riti-bhagya* (patron-client) and land tenure relations has eroded due to increasing scarcity in arable land and penetration of capitalist market forces. The main causes of the land decline include: a doubling of Nepal's population from eight million to nearly nineteen million people since unification; erosion of the Himalayan foothills at a steady and pernicious rate; and sporadic land reform policies that have not successfully transferred land from those with plenty to those with none (Bienen, 1990; Eckholm, 1976; Regmi, 1978; Seddon, 1987; Seddon et al., 1979). As a result, the low-caste families in Bhalara struggle daily for survival.

At an average altitude of 4500 feet, Bhalara enjoys rich seasonal changes from cold winters to hot and dry springs that erupt into many rainy months of summer monsoon. The most spectacular season is autumn when the brilliant green rice is ready for harvest, the days are crisp and sunny, the nights cool and comfortable, the harvest ripe, and the mountains spectacular. Bhalara is an isolated region, accessible only by foot after an initial day-long flight from Kathmandu. Dry goods are portered in from India, journeys taking one month.

## FARMERS, ARTISANS AND CASTE IN THE HIMALAYAS

The people of Bhalara call themselves *gauko*

*manchay* (village hill people). Their clustered hamlets of stone, wood, and mud houses dot the sides of rolling and ever-rising hills that peak in the western Himalayan mountains, and flatten and descend to the Gangetic plain in the distant south. The vast snowcapped peaks are visible from only the highest vantage points in the surrounding area, but the mountains frame the identity of these people as hill peasants—small-scale farmers who use no mechanized or capitalized means of production, have little capital for exchange purposes, and have a high population density to feed and house. From every vantage point in Bhalara one sees steep and narrow terraced slopes, green with fertile crops of summer rice or winter wheat, and brown in the late spring and fall between growing seasons. Connecting the hamlets are a myriad of human and animal footpaths cutting across fields and up the sides of hills, guiding people to and from their fields, their neighbours' homes, and more distant sites. There are no roads in Bhalara, nor is there electricity or running water inside the homes.

Caste ranking in Bhalara is similar to that found in India and the rest of Nepal and is based on relative ritual purity. The ideological link among the low-caste groups is their ritual impurity relative to those above them. Although there are many arguments within caste theory about what makes the low-castes low (for a full discussion see Cameron, 1995), locally they are labelled *nachunay manchay* or *jaat* (not touchable people or caste), *saano jaat* (small caste), and *talo jaat* (low caste).

In addition to their untouchable status in relation to those of high-caste, there is ranking among the low-caste groups themselves. The upper ranked and intermarrying groups include the following artisans and specialized laborers: basket weavers, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, masons, and former guards for the local king. These artisans, some of whom are also marginal farmers, do not touch those of caste rank lower than themselves. The second tier includes leatherworkers and tailors who do not intermarry but are of equivalent status. At the bottom of the caste hierarchy is a single group of potters,

musicians, and female prostitutes who are untouchable to all other groups above them. The highest ranked and most ritually pure groups in the Nepalese caste structure are the Brahmins, followed by the Thakuri and Chhetri castes<sup>1</sup>.

*Luhar Ironsmiths* : The Luhar<sup>2</sup> make agricultural tools and household utensils such as sickles, knives, hoes, shovels, plough tips, nails, and axes. The work of the ironsmith requires physical strength and endurance of noise and heat. A Luhar's smithy is a noisy hut adjoining the house, a popular place for low-caste men to socialize. All households in Bhalara require Luhar commodities. Even if not engaged in farming, each family minimally requires sickles, axes and knives. Thus, the Luhar are the most economically secure low-caste in Bhalara.

*Okheda Guards* : The Okheda provided a caste-based service (rather than being artisans) as former guards and tax collectors for the local king. Today the few Okheda families in the region are farmers and laborers.

*Oudh Masons* : The Oudh are masons and carpenters, and like the Okheda, are few in number. All houses and shops in Bhalara have been built solely or partially by the men of the Oudh caste. The demand for their services is sporadic and most of them subsist from farming and laboring.

*Parki Basketmakers* : The Parki make a variety of storage baskets and floor mats from bamboo procured in the high hill regions. Their products are more expensive than those of the other low-caste artisans, but most families in Bhalara own one or more grain storage baskets, flour sieves, and bread baskets. Only wealthier families (Brahmin, Thakuri, Chettri) own nonessential Parki products such as floor mats. Baskets and mats are well made, can last a decade or more, and are aesthetically pleasing with their smooth golden surface.

*Damai Tailors and Seamstresses* : The Damai

are tailors and seamstresses. The skill of sewing is kept within the caste since Damai marry only other Damai. They are often called "master", a term for someone with a special skill. The Damai men also perform entertaining and ritual roles at weddings.

*Sarki Leather Artisans* : The Sarki make products from cow and water buffalo skin. These include leather sandals and shoes, plough harnesses, saddles, and flour sifters. The demand for these products is sporadic; farmers need new harnesses only after several years, and the sturdy leather sandals and shoes have been replaced by Nepalese or Indian manufactured rubber thongs. As a result of low demand for their products, the Sarki are extremely vulnerable economically and are the poorest caste in Bhalara. Their children are malnourished and uneducated, and their hamlets are crowded and crumbling.

*Baadi Potters and Entertainers* : The Baadi are not farmers, and they have no desire to become farmers (unlike the other low castes). No Baadi families own agricultural land, and they never seek to buy or rent land. However, Baadi are fond of livestock and several families own and raise water buffalo. But primarily the Baadi are potters who make water vessels and pipes out of local red clay. However, their products are gradually being replaced by plastic, bronze, and brass containers from India and other parts of Nepal. The Baadi are also entertainers - singers, dancers, and female prostitutes - and are the lowest ranked in Bhalara's caste hierarchy.

Table 21.1. Lists the activities involved in the production and service processes of each artisan and entertaining caste, and provides a breakdown of men's and women's involvement in these activities. As can be seen in table 21.1, men in general are more involved in artisan production than women, yet women's degree of involvement varies from complete involvement in the entire production process (as among the Damai and Parki), to partial or supplemental involvement (as in the Baadi, Sarki, and Luhar), to complete absence (as in the Oudh caste).

## RITI-BHAGYA STRUCTURE AND PRACTICE

Integrated into the agricultural economy of

1. This structure mirrors that of India (Dumont, 1970) but with two unique features. There are no recognizable Vaishya groups, who occupy the third level on the Indian ranking system (Hitchcock, 1978; Hofer, 1979). Rather, at this third level are the Matwali groups which include the numerous Tibeto-Burman (and largely Buddhist) ethnic groups in Nepal, such as the Newar, Tamang, Sherpa and Magar. There are no families from these ethnic groups in Bhalara.

2. The Luhar are also known as Kaami in other parts of Nepal and in India. "Luhar" is more commonly used in Bhalara.

Bhalara is a traditional system of labor and grain exchange with rights of inherited patronage called *riti-bhagya*. The *riti-bhagya* system of the past and the present binds low-caste families to high-caste families through economic interdependence, advocacy and aid, and Hindu religious ideology. In exchange for low-caste products and services, high-caste landowner patrons called *riti* regularly provide harvest shares to, and are expected to meet many other subsistence needs of, their low-caste landless dependents, called *bhagya*. Harvest pay-

**Table 21.1 Gender division of low-caste artisan activities**

Caste	Male	Female
<i>Baadi</i> Potters, entertainers	collect, mix clay. pound clay. shape vessel parts. dry. fire. decorate./dance sing, drum.	carry, mix clay. shape pipes. carry fodder. deliver goods./dance, sing, prostitute.
<i>Sarki</i> sew leather goods	skin animal. tan hide. design and stitch goods, deliver.	design and stitch goods. deliver.
<i>Sunar</i> gold- and silver- smith (none in survey sample)	collect materials. sell gold, silver. design, create jewelry: fire, hammer gold into sheets, silver into pellets; make wax mold; melt gold into mold, pound silver into shape; shine, decorate, deliver.	pump bellows. deliver.
<i>Luhar</i> ironsmith	collect, recycle iron scraps; fire, pound iron into tools. deliver.	pump bellow. deliver.
<i>Parki</i> weave baskets	collect bamboo. split into strips. design. weave. deliver.	collect bamboo. split into strips. design. weave. deliver.
<i>Oudh</i> mason	collect rocks, clay, manure, wood; break rocks, carve wood; measure, construct wall, house, steps.	-
<i>Damai</i> tailor, seamstress	buy cloth and/or notions; sew men's women's, children's clothing, deliver.	buy cloth and/or notions; sew men's, women's children clothing. deliver.
<i>Okheda</i> guards (none in survey sample)	guards and tax collectors for the former king	-

ments, called *khalo*, given by landholding *riti* families to low-caste *bhagya* families serve as the economic and moral backbone of the patron-client relationship (Scott, 1976) since they establish the right of each family to ask for services, food, or cash advances from the other in time of need. Thus, the *riti-bhagya* system in Nepal developed as a South Asian form of feudal economy in which landholding and labor relations followed caste lines. Its Indian equivalent is the familiar *jajmani* system (Beidelman, 1959; Caplan, 1972; Dumont, 1970; Elder, 1970; Gould, 1953; Gould, 1967; Harper, 1959; Kolende, 1963; Pocock, 1962; Raheja, 1991). The *riti-bhagya* system was, and is today, fundamentally an economic one.

Up until modern times, lower caste families worked exclusively in commodity and service production for upper caste landowners, and few had little need for land. Throughout the reign of the Bhalara kings many lower caste families worked for the royal family. Low-caste people who were interested in farming were given small amounts of temporary sharecrop (*adhiya*) or plough land (*haliya*) by the ruling family. *Haliya* is a form of land tenancy in which land was exchanged for ploughing the king's fields (and later those of other high-caste patrons).

Low-caste labor ties to other nonruling landholding families such as Brahmins and the indigenous Khas people evolved as rice cultivation developed, population increased, and agricultural production intensified. Upper caste and landholding families who needed low-caste commodities (such as farming tools or clothing), services (such as laundering), and labor developed economic relationships with those lower caste families. Low-caste families, in turn, relied increasingly on the *khalo* harvest shares from their patrons; upwards of eighty per cent of the total food consumption for some families was comprised by *khalo* payments that adults (and older adolescents, particularly those married) had earned. Certainly the vast majority of low-caste families maintained patron-client relations with many upper-caste families.

The economic interdependency between low and high-caste families eventually involved nearly all families in the Bhalara community, and continues today. To guarantee that both parties meet their economic obligations to one another, a kinship-like dimension to the *riti-bhagya* system has developed

in which exclusive rights to employment and labor from certain families were established. In keeping with the patrilineal system of property inheritance, low-caste rights to *riti* and high-caste rights to *bhagya* were passed from father to son for generations. Thus, caste-based economic interdependency developed in such a way that for the last few hundred years the rights to *riti-bhagya* relations among the families of Bhalara have been inherited patrilineally<sup>3</sup>. Joined at the seams through generations of consanguinal males on both sides, the values that circumscribe *riti-bhagya* relations include the right to employment. Under most circumstances a *riti* patron will not and cannot replace the low-caste *bhagya* with another family of same caste. And the low-caste family who "eats" a *riti's khalo* is responsible to them. However, if an artisan client fails to meet the labor expectations of the relationships, the high-caste patron has the right to find another artisan.

Artisan products are given either to *riti* or sold to non-*riti*. The non-*riti* consumer is aptly called the *kinay manchay* (buying person) because she or he shares a situation-delineated economic relation with the low-caste artisan - simply, one pays a relatively set price for the artisans' products, and the relationship ends there. This single market type of transaction contrasts with the inherited *riti-bhagya* patronage, which has two main features; 1) continuous negotiations over material exchanges, extending indefinitely in time; and 2) guaranteed *khalo* harvest shares.

The bulk of *khalo* payments is in the form of unhusked wheat and rice (the two main crops in Bhalara) but may include other grains such as millet, lentils, and soybeans<sup>4</sup>. Although *khalo* is considered a payment for services rendered, the *bhagya*

must still go to the threshing floor or the *riti's* house to obtain it. This practice is called *maagnu* (asking or begging) (see Cameron, 1993 for a further discussion of *maagnu*). In addition to the *khalo* harvest shares, all of the commodity-producing castes charge a fee called *basho* for their labor and products at the time of delivery.

### *The Right and Responsibility to Produce*

The concept of the right to produce appropriately describes certain inheritance practices in low-caste lineages. The right to produce for certain *riti* families is inherited through lineage males, and includes the right to dispose of those production rights - in other words, to substitute one's own production with someone else's. In this, rights of dispensation of *riti* production relations make it possible for low-caste people to rent or buy a *riti* from another low-caste family. For example, one Damai man purchased a *riti* in a nearby village for Rs. 500 (\$20) and moved his tailoring business there. Since he used family resources to buy out the other *bhagya*, he is expected to share *khalo* from his new *riti* with his mother and brother.

The most common reason for *riti* changes is a male's departure for India. In his absence, the man's wife fulfills the *riti* obligations with the help of her brothers-in-law. Temporary *riti* arrangements such as these are so flexible that with a minimal amount of effort at meeting the patron's obligations, a woman can still 'beg' the *khalo*. However, if after a few years the obligations cannot be met successfully, the rights must be sold to others; this will be signalled by increasing reluctance of *riti* to give *khalo* to the *bhagya*. Before ties are severed, though, the *riti* may request other substitute forms of labor from the *bhagya*.

## CONCLUSION

### *Transformations in Untouchable Women's Work: Reconceptualizing "Occupational Caste"*

Within the *riti-bhagya* system, women's and men's productive work is delineated not solely through caste but through gender as well. Productive work directed toward family-based subsistence for which one gets paid in cash or in kind is meaningfully linked not only to one's caste and landholding status, but to whether one is female or male

3. An aspect of the patron-client system in South Asia that is often ignored by writers on the subject is that both high- and low-caste families require the commodities produced by other low-caste families (for example, low-caste goldsmiths need storage baskets woven by low-caste basketweavers), and therefore all caste groups maintain *bhagya*. However, the vast majority of payments and the longest standing relationships are those between high-caste landowning patrons and their low-caste and predominantly landless clients.

4. The exception to this is the low-caste patron. Due to the general scarcity of grain among low-caste families, low-caste *riti* pay for low-caste commodities with exchanges of services or artisan commodities, rather than grains.

and married or unmarried, as well. For people of low caste, productive work is often labelled by anthropologists as "occupational" because of the artisan commodity and service production contracted by landholders (Bennett, 1983; Berreman, 1963; Beidelman, 1959; Caplan, 1972; Dumont, 1970; Elder, 1970; Gould, 1953, 1967; Harper, 1959; Kolenda, 1963; Pocock, 1962; Raheja, 1991). Low-caste work in agricultural (*i.e.*, nonartisan) production done for either themselves or for others has been ignored or incompletely addressed in the anthropological literature on South Asia, particularly in discussions about caste. Reasons for scholars' overemphasis on so called "occupational" work of the people of lower castes include the history of their landlessness, their economic dependency on upper caste patrons, the unique qualities of artisan work in the rural peasant economy, and the (invalid) conflation of lower caste ritual roles with their overall subsistence work. Indeed, one finds the terms "occupational caste" and "low-caste" used interchangeably throughout the literature on South Asia.

It must be recognized, however, that *all* work done by low-caste women for patrons - whether artisan commodity or agricultural production - integrates the low-caste domestic mode of provisioning into the production relations demarcated by the local *riti-bhagya* system. The *riti-bhagya* system demands not just the artisan work of men, but lower caste female labor of all kinds as well. This point is important to refiguring our understanding of (inherited) patron-client relations found throughout South Asia. Specifically, we need to reconsider the economic dimensions of *riti-bhagya* relations from being reproduced solely through the "occupational" work (*i.e.*, artisan and service) of low-caste (male) clients for high-caste patrons, to one in which lower caste female labor of many types is seen as fundamental to reproducing those relations.

Applying the label "occupational" to low-caste work in general is misleading because, while it may accurately describe many low-caste *men's* work, the term "occupational" does not accurately describe the productive work of today's *women* of untouchable caste. Low-caste women's work is not confined to, nor is it necessarily defined by, artisan production. Due to the changes in the gender division of labor low-caste women now spend more productive time in agricultural than artisan produc-

tion (Cameron, 1995). This is a distinct and identifiable change from the past, when low-caste women's labor was not significantly different from their male artisan counterparts.

Furthermore, lower caste women's contemporary productive work is heterogenous and flexible. Women are farmers for their families and other families, daily-wage laborers in agricultural and nonagricultural production, entertainers, and porters. They may or may not engage in artisan production. But the issue of women and "occupational" work is not only an empirical one, it is a theoretical one as well. Given the meanings of 'impurity' often associated with low-caste artisans and their products, women's lack of participation in artisan production compels further reflection on the nature of caste in relation to gender.

## KEY WORDS AND ABSTRACT

**KEY WORDS** Caste. Nepal. Patron-Client. Farmers. Artisans. Gender.

**ABSTRACT** This study examines the nature of the ties that bind low-caste people to high-caste people in a rural agrarian community in far western Nepal. From the advent of national-ist unification of Nepal in the mid-1950's to the present democratic era, the material base of traditional intercaste *riti-bhagya* (patron-client) and land tenure relations has eroded due to increasing scarcity in arable land and penetration of market forces. Integrated into the subsistence agricultural economy, the *riti-bhagya* system of the past and the present links low-caste families to high-caste families through economic interdependence, advocacy, aid, and Hindu religious ideology. Low-caste artisans and laborers include ironsmiths, goldsmiths, basketweavers, masons, guards, potters, tailors and seamstresses, and entertainers. The study concludes with a re-examination of the gender division of labor among the lower caste artisans.

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