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Caste Solidarity in Managing Social Networks: Evidence from the Western Himalayas, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract:

Harsh environmental conditions are synonymous with the mountain ecosystems. This impels the mountain communities to develop strategies to overcome the vagaries of nature for their survival and in turn brings an interplay of solidarities. The paper is based on ethnographic data gathered from Jangi village in district Kinnaur of Himachal Pradesh, and attempts to document, how village solidarities among the Kolis (weavers) caste group shape up and help them to sustain a livelihood through social networking. Here the documentation of social networking can be seen as an indication of how small and combined efforts can make a job sustainable along with creating a we feeling among the members of the caste group. This paper can be seen as contributing to the growing body of literature on sustainable development and social dynamics in mountain ecosystems.

Keywords: Caste solidarity, social networking, sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Rugged terrain, inhospitable climate and lack of fertile land for agriculture, characterises the mountain ecosystems. Hence, survival is always at stake for all those communities inhabiting these regions of the world. We often find in mountains, the land use practices and many other survival strategies are a product of a long history of creative adaptation to local environments and ecological conditions such as climate, terrain, soil, water, air, plants, and animals (Raza, 2007). These adaptive practices have given rise to 'indigenous knowledge' that enables these people to live well and with confidence in diverse and sometimes harsh environments, as well as develop their livelihoods, such as weaving, hunting and gathering, shifting cultivation, nomadic pastoralism and terraced agriculture, as well as trade of natural and cultural products through social networks.

Analyzing this socio-cultural dimension of human engagements with non-human environment and to identify the traditional knowledge of the people that informs this relationship, is the core purpose of this research paper. Concepts like 'indigenous knowledge systems' and 'social networking' have been used to highlight the nexus between culture and environment, which has helped tribal communities around the world for their livelihood sustenance. Both these concepts in the present perspective have an important bearing as far as sustainable development of communities is concerned.

Faith in the resourcefulness of the indigent has led many contributors to the discourses in sustainable development towards building up an information base in indigenous knowledge. Dei (1995) for instance, among others (Singh and Titi, 1995) views indigenous knowledge as a fundamental tool for the empowerment of the poor in the world's drive towards sustainable development. Drawing from the information he gathered in the West African region, Dei (1995) argues it is increasingly being realized that the establishment of a more humane society in a globally transformed world will depend on the extent to which common struggles are based on the internal linkages between people's histories, heritage, philosophies, value system and knowledge base. This knowledge draws on the common sense ideas of local people about the everyday realities of living. Indigenous knowledge is a worldview that shapes how people relate to their environment. It may be holistic in outlook and adaptive by nature, gathered over generations by observers whose lives depended on this information and its use. It often accumulates incrementally, tested by trial-and-error and transmitted to future generations orally or by shared practical experiences (Ohmagari and Berkes, 1997).

An important feature of indigenous knowledge system, especially where poverty is prevalent, is the tendency to spread income generating knowledge. This is an almost induced phenomenon where collaborative action, brought about by normative behaviour through kin groups, neighbourhood ties and household linkages, lead to spill over from one area to the another. A spillover of information is an important manifestation of indigenous knowledge base over which the local inhabitants feel a sense of collective ownership. A spill-over in the present context is the transference of local knowledge from one place to the other, from one person to the other, who are either close by or who live in distant places. Thus, the main function being, to empower people and generate local solidarity and assist in building sustainable livelihoods.

No.	Age	Sex	Network	Distance	Types of Items	Earning (Rs)	Total Rs.
1	18	M	Fathers elder sister	20 km	1.Chubba-Long coat 2. Suthan- Woolen Trouser 3. Tefang-Cap	2000 200 120	2320
2.	23	F	Father's elder sister	12 km	1. Choli – Blouse 2. Tefang – Cap	200 120	320
3.	36	M	Father's brother	20 km	1. Chubba-Long coat 2. Suthan-Woolen trouser 3. Dhoru – Woolen sari	2500 250 4000	6750
4.	45	F	Mother's mother	15 km	1. Dhoru- Woolen sari 2. Pattu-Shawl 3. Samu Kurti -Kurti	2700 3000 900	6600
5.	28	F	Mother's elder sister	12 km	1. Shalwar / Kurti 2. Choli-Blouse 3.Tefang-Cap	120 200 60	500
6.	18	F	Mother's brother	15 km.	1. Kamez- Shirt 2. Shalwar Kurti	60 100	160
7.	26	F	Maternal cousin (Mo ElSiSo)	20 Km.	1. Choli-Blouse 2. Shalwar Kurti 3. Pattu- Shawl	150 120 2000	2270
8.	49	F	Mother's Younger sister	12 km.	1. Tefang- Cap 2. Shalwar Kurti	100 120	220
9.	36	F	Father in law	12 km	1. Pattu- Shawl 2. Choli- Blouse 3. Shalwar	2500 150 100	2750
10.	41	M	Friends in neighbouring village	8 km	1.Chubba-Long Coat 2. Suthan-woolen Trouser 3.Kameez-Shirt	1800 200 60	2060
11.	28	M	Friends in neighbouring village	8 km	1. Shalwar Kurti-Kurta 2.Dhoru-Woolen Sari 3. Kherach-Mat	100 3500 400	4000
12.	55	M	Friends in neighbouring village	12 km.	1. Dhoru- Woolen Sari 2. Sanukurti-Kurta	4500 800	5300
13.	62	F	Neighbouring households	–	1. Dhoru- Woolen Sari 2. Pattu-Shawl 3.Kherach-Mat	2500 2000 200	4700
14	25	M	Neighbouring households	–	1. Shirt 2. Shalwar Kurti 3.School Uniform	60 120 200	380

Table 1: Social Networks (These are individual earnings)

Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the horizontal caste solidarities which has led to a formation of social networks among the Koli (weaver) caste group in Jangi village (altitude 2790 m) of Morang Tehsil in Pooh Division of Kinnaur district in Himachal. Such horizontal ties of castes are important, as in several spheres of life members of same caste and those connected with affinal ties tend to act together and help each other. These extend the interactive network and social space of a village well beyond its boundaries into neighbouring areas (Marriott, 1955). The Koli caste group, as we know does spinning, weaving, tailoring and also play musical instruments in the temples every fortnightly. Now days due to paucity of money and regular income some of them have switched off to wage earnings in construction and development projects in and around the village.

In documenting social networking, structured interviews were taken up. There were also even 'depth interviews' in which I allowed the respondents to express themselves freely about their subjective dimensions. Building up the profile of this target group, certain common aspects were researched. Their ages, the distance of their natal homes, number of items manufactured and so on. Life histories were taken up to build up a detailed generic development of the sample group. Profile building was time consuming and required more than one visit to most of the people who were interviewed. Collective time spent ranged from between two to three hours, which was spread over several visits. Reconstructing the 'life histories' on how they acquired their knowledge or dispensed with it for the benefit of other required careful backtracking of thoughts that pointed towards many directions in the Tehsil.

2. Social Networking among the Koli Caste Group

For the study, I have selected the Koli (weavers) for a simple reason, that they are numerically second highest (97) out of a population of a total population (668) and secondly, that most of them are still pursuing their traditional weaving for sustenance of livelihood. Thus, in a way showing that local structures and indigenous knowledge systems are still crucial for sustainable development strategies as well as maintaining the ethos and culture of the village life.

The sample size of the Kolis interviewed was 60 from a population of 97 people. Others were casually spoken to, to get affirm information, elicited from the interviewers. Out of the 60 Kolis who were interviewed, only 14 Kolis (both male and female), provided information on social networks. This helped in reconstructing on how they acquired the knowledge of weaving, designing and stitching from kinship networks which included friends in neighbourhood, and kinship ties in and outside the village.

The information gathered can be seen in table 2.3, reflects on several important aspects of social lifelike kinship networks, neighbourhood ties and more importantly how they galvanize together to sustain a living out of such a meagre occupation.

Another important point to note here is that these 14 Kolis who are shown in table 2.3 are those who have learnt the trade from someone who is away from their home. All those who got the knowledge from their own parents or family members living in their homes, are not shown in table 2.3. Another important point to note here is that the earnings shown in table 2.3 ranges over a month to a couple of months, because some of the garments like Dhuru and Chubba takes approximately two to three months in getting finished. Moreover, the earnings shown in the table are 'individual earnings'.

On analysis, table 2.3 highlights the age, sex, networks, the source from where they got the knowledge, its distance, the type of items they made and lastly their income. Numbers one to three reflects connections with paternal relatives, numbers 4 to 8 reflect connections directly from maternal relatives. Number 9 who got married at an early age learnt the art of weaving and stitching from her father-in-law, after her husband died. 10, 11 and 12 learnt stitching and weaving from friends in neighbouring villages, and lastly 13 and 14 learnt from neighbouring households. The earnings show some fluctuation in the prices, this is due to the fact that some are simple while the others involve complex embroidery and hence they are a bit expensive. All these activities, one could say, lead to common forms of social and household patterns, giving rise to a cultural and economic ethos that is impossible to ignore.

3. The Cultural Ethos Linked with Social Networking

One can easily notice that behind each individual's earnings there is a set of activities, which highlights the social context in which the production occurs. These activities are an illustration, which anthropologists have been stressing for decades, on how social is tied to the economic and how both the activities are linked to their domestic homes, if not to the global economy. The social and economic are inseparable especially in rural areas. This does pose a major challenge to the protagonists of economic growth theory which since world-war two have consistently ignored the value of social factors in economic growth.

We see that apart from having a strong economic value of clothes, there exists a significant cultural link between clothes and culture. It is seen that especially in weddings and gift giving ceremonies, clothes like Dhuru, Pattu, Samukurti, Chubba etc. forms an integral part of marriages. They become an important medium that reinforces social relationships and indigenous hierarchy to a certain extent. Gifts are given to the parents of bridegroom and also to the bridegroom in all wedding ceremonies. The present ability and workmanship are generally expressed in appreciation at the time of gift receiving. Apart from this, the above clothes are also worn in festivals, rituals and birth ceremonies and help the people in maintaining a distinct Kinnaurese identity. Moreover, the Kherach (mats) prepared from the wool of sheep or goat, helps to insulate cold surface of the floor in winters. The Kherach acts as a buffer against the cold and then the individual cover themselves with blankets. These Kherach are also used when some friends or relatives visit the house. Traditionally they are expected to sit on the Kherach woven by the Kolis. Another aspect which is linked with culture and economy is the symbiotic relationship which is called the Binana (mutual co-operation) between the non-artisans and the artisan groups in non agricultural field only. This type of exchange persists between the Rajputs on one hand the Koli, the Lohar and the Badhai on the other. Keeping it in the Kinnaurese context, here, just a small reference to it is made to link the Binana System with the issue of social networking in the cultural context.

With the Kolis, the Rajputs have two types of Binana, depending on the nature of work done by them. One is Bonu Binana and the other is Sui Binana. For the above two Binana a close relationship develops between the two ethnic groups. Where the Koli are weavers, they serve the Rajputs by weaving their clothes; the Rajputs establish a Bonu Binana with them. Under this, the Rajput give the Koli, a quantity of wool which the later spin and weave and make required woollen clothing. In lieu of this service, the Koli weaver gets cash and sometimes cereals. Sui banana is present between the Rajput and the Koli, who tailor the required woollen or cotton clothing's for the Rajput. In exchange, the Koli gets his remuneration in cash or sometimes he gets paid in cereals. I suggest that this traditional interaction persists because, regardless of the economic and political changes that have occurred, it continues to be of fundamental importance to the maintenance of the social status and patterns of social interaction that are essential for strengthening the rural social structure and in a way also helping on to build upon local creativity and entrepreneurship in vulnerable environments.

4. Spreading the Knowledge through Networking

Everyone whose account is mentioned in table 2.3 has acquired knowledge from their neighbourhoods or from some initiative that was a product of the spill over from another area. The spill over to them occurred through various processes, including chance. The recourse to knowledge of weaving is based on the common will by those who have to ameliorate the impoverished statuses of kin, friends and neighbours. The willingness to share knowledge and ideas stems from solidarity. There is a special tendency to filter this knowledge to kins who do not have any income. There is a feeling of commitment among household members to participate in the activities, especially since each 'ones' survival is at stake. Therefore, this organizational pattern among the Kolis ensures the spreading

and survival of knowledge in weaving, stitching and tailoring. Each member of the household ought to have at least a basic knowledge of the working patterns, which in turn introduces other well-meaning kin or neighbours in it. In this way the dignity of the household and wider community is sustained.

Moreover, if we look at table 2.3 then we can notice an equal participation from the female Kolis, which brings into light that how self-initiative and collaborative action by the weaker section can contribute towards the capacity to survive in areas with poor infrastructure and proper support mechanisms. They have demonstrated an ability to match their counterpart males in earning as much they are earning. There is a sense among young women about self-worth and dignity. When questions regarding self-employment or achievements were asked, the only response from them was that they were strong willed and wanted to remain self-employed. One of the women even got emotional while answering me, she summarized her point in succinct terms: "I work to feed and earn for my family so that when I am not alive, there is much to take care of many young ones." This woman spoke to me at length about how she supplemented her income by going door to door for work related to weaving and stitching. She even managed a plot of small land on which she did subsistence farming. The land provided her with some vegetables which were used for daily consumption. She even had planted apple cuttings which would take few years to become beneficial. Thus all the women take personal credit for resource management and earning for their family. But somehow they are unable to notice the function of social networking behind all their endeavours.

5. Conclusion

The documentation of social networking here, in itself is an indication that how small combined efforts of local people can make a meagre job sustainable. The study of social networking among the Kolis of Jangi reflects the dynamics of indigenous knowledge which opens new vistas for the government agencies to look into. The horizontal solidarity among the Kolis presses the need to recognize the application of social networking based on indigenous knowledge around various parts of the country, especially in rural areas. This will certainly ensure sustainable development when and where ever applied. The strong horizontal ties helping to form networks, reflects the helping attitude of a lower caste towards its caste members, thus becoming a basis for further research into caste studies.

6. References

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