



Caste Structure In Colonial Kumaon: A Study Of Things To Leave Behind

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Abstract: This research paper explores the caste hierarchy in Kumaoni society through the character of a Kumaoni Brahmin women named Tilottama. The novel Things to Leave Behind written by Namita Gokhale is set in the years spanning from 1840 to 1912. It is about the time when everything was changing in Kumaoni society due to the advent of British Raj. It documents the centuries old caste system in Kumaon. The rites and rituals of a high born Thuldhoti Brahmin and the rigid rules of caste purity determines the structure of Kumaoni society. Gokhale's novel also tells the story of Brahmin women in Kumaon and their reaction to the whole set up of Brahminical patriarchy. Thus, this paper is an attempt to explore the ancient caste system of Kumaon and its changing structure in colonial period.

Keywords: Caste, Brahminism, Thuldhoti Brahmin, Tilottama, Kumaon.

Introduction

This paper discusses the traditional caste system of Kumaon. The distinct socio-cultural features of Kumaon include its peculiar structure of caste. Namita Gokhale in her 'Himalayan Trilogy' has particularly explored the way in which caste system works in Kumaon. Gokhale through her characters has presented a vivid account of the social stratification in Kumaon. The novel Things to Leave Behind explores the nuances of caste system through the perspective of a Brahmin woman named Tilottama. The story is set in the era of British colonialism in hilly areas of Kumaon. The years from 1840 to 1912 act as a backdrop to highlight casteism prevalent in Kumaoni society during the convergence of colonial rule and emerging modernity.

To understand the distinctive caste structure of Kumaon, we first need to explore the cultural history of Kumaon. The region being geographically isolated from the rest of India gives it the distinct culture vis a vis its ecological conditions, religious beliefs and practices, festivals, caste structure, folk songs and legends. The major factor which shaped culture of this region is the migration of people from the rest of India during early medieval and medieval period. As suggested by many scholars the earliest settlers of the Kumaon were Doms.

Atkinson argues that Doms are descendants of the Kol tribe and were the earliest settlers of the region (Atkinson, 1964). Later Khasas subjugated Doms and reduced them to slaves. The Khasas did not follow caste distinctions and know nothing about Vedas and Brahminism. They observed the religion very distinct from the orthodox Hinduism. The Katyuri kings introduced Buddhism in the hill region of Kumaon around 7th Century AD. However, the visit of Adi Shankaracharya to Kumaon Himalayas around 8th Century paved way for the establishment of many Hindu temples. The Katyuris persuaded learned Brahmins from the plains to settle in the hills by supporting them with the grants of land. The region of Kumaon witnessed many political, economic and social changes right from the Katyuri dynasty to the colonial period. The caste was introduced later in the region by high caste immigrants from plain areas of India. It is important to note that neither Khasis nor Doms had any connection with the orthodox Hinduism and the stratification of society was not based on caste rather it was rooted in the concept of power.

The natives of Kumaon when came in contact with the Brahmins and Rajputs of who migrated to the region between 8th and 18th Century started adopting the practices of orthodox Hinduism. The immigrants brought with them the new criteria for social differentiation based on the idea of ritual. The division of society was based on distinction between 'clean' and 'unclean' castes (Sanwal 19). The categories Thul-Jat and Khas correspond to the distinction between 'immigrant' and 'indigenous' category. Dom=3

were assigned the lowest position in the social hierarchy of Kumaon. The Khasas who were in large number in the region of Kumaon used to cultivate their own land on their own with the help of Doms. Before immigration of Thuljats, Khasis controlled the land. When the Khasis came in contact with the Thuljat, they become the part of Kumaoni caste system. Brahmins and Rajputs emerged among Khasiyas, however they managed to retain their distinct customs and traditions (L.D Joshi, 84).

Those Brahmins and Rajputs who claim to originate from the plains of are referred to as Thuljats. The Brahmins were considered the descendants of the Vedic priests who migrated along with Rajputs from the plains of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra or Karnataka region. Thus, in Kumaon a three-tiered structure evolved through a historical process. The caste system was based upon three-fold hierarchy- the Thuljaats who were considered superior and hold powerful positions, the Khasas who cultivated their lands and the third are Doms who were the artisanal class considered polluting by the upper castes. It is important to note that the caste structure of Kumaon is bit peculiar in its form. The Brahmins are divided internally into indigenous who are known as Nan-dhoti (short dhoti) and the immigrants called Thul-dhoti (long dhoti). They both belong to the caste of Brahmin. However, when it comes to the interaction between the two there exists the element of differentiation. The Thul-dhoti Brahmin are usually ranked higher than the nan-dhoti in terms of acknowledged ritual status.

Almora nurtured a complicated stepladder of caste and class: the long-dhoti and the short-dhoti Brahmins, warrior-caste Rajputs and Thakurs, trader-caste Sahs, the artisan castes of the Shilpkars and Tamtas. The Dom or outcastes too had their specified place.... (Gokhale 17-18)

It is important to note that the varna system which developed in Kumaon was based on the vocation a person adopted while settling in the region. The society in Kumaon evolved in such a way that every caste in the region had a crucial role to play in the economic and ritual life of the society. Hence the Doms also formed an integral part of the Kumaoni society. The Doms were known as artisan castes also known as shilpkars such as Tamtas, the Lohars and the Kolis were an important group in the economic sphere of Kumaoni society as they had a significant control over economic resources. They helped their masters with agricultural work and it can be said that agricultural settlements could not have been transformed the terrain of Himalayas without the support of Shilpkars (Furer-Haimendorf 11-68).

The Doms, or outcastes, too had their specified place in the scheme of things, tending the Bhairav temples, appeasing ancestral spirits, conducting jagar and ritual exorcisms. (Gokhale 18)

However, with time the developments in the caste system proved to be deteriorating for the Doms. They were started to be associated with the element of ritual purity and impurity thereby giving the Dom a caste like identity. Doms were restricted to the outer periphery of village locality away from the upper caste settlements. They had their own separate source of water, separate passage and stone structures. The significant social and ritual barrier is between the twice born and ritually clean castes and the Doms (Berreman 121). They were considered dirty, thus suitable to do the filthy work of upper caste. The practise of manually cleaning excrement from private and public dry toilets was prevalent in Kumaon. It was consistent with the caste-based system where lower caste worked as manual scavengers who used to collect human waste on daily basis, load it into cane baskets or metal troughs and carry it away on their heads for disposal at the outskirts of the settlements. The Brahmin houses in Almora were modern house, with a dry latrine on the first floor, opening through a wooden ladder on to the back alley, and the toilet, the 'sundas' cleared daily by a sweeper. This jamadar carried the family's excreta in a basket balanced on his head to the edge of the hill, where he tipped it over to the slope below. (Gokhale 21)

The Brahmins were obsessed with the idea of personal purity. They strictly adhere to the prescribed Brahminical rituals to avoid caste violations. To ward off evil a canister of Gangajal chhyoda was placed before the threshold every Brahmin household in Kumaon for purification. The water from the river Ganga was mixed with water from the nearby spring known as 'Panuanaula' and the local water is poured on the sacred water of holy river. Moreover, the cow urine was believed to have the properties to purify the brahmins from the polluting shadow of outsiders:

Another smaller container was placed alongside the canister of holy water. This was filled with rancid cow's urine, gau mootra, gathered daily from the cattle sheds for this specific purpose; the five gifts of the cow milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung- were sacred antidotes to the evils of the 'outside' world, of course. (Gokhale 142)

The Gangajal chhyoda was used by Brahmins to purify themselves from the contact of low caste as well as British people who were also included in the category of 'outside world'.

Colonialism transformed the political domain of Kumaon restructuring its social sphere. It also changed the people of Kumaon who lived in the colonized Kumaon. The English educated elite had acquired the changed lifestyle which came through modern education, new occupations and the influence of western ideas. The technological innovations practically had the effect on the psyche of natives during nineteenth century. Namita Gokhale comments on the changing situation in Kumaon.

An imperceptible change was taking place in Almora. People, things, buildings, clothes-all looked same as ever to the lazy eye, but they were transforming. Nobody noticed, perhaps because nobody was in the habit of noticing, and the process of change was so slow as to be almost invisible. (Gokhale 125)

This change is evident through the character of Jayesh Chandra Pant who was born in the eminent family of teachers and physicians. Jayesh pant was a modern man who was torn between the Kumaoni rituals of caste system and the modern sensibility of rationalism introduced by the colonial masters. English bookshops opened in the region of Nainital unlocked the window to the larger world for the natives of Kumaon. Jayesh had read the western books on evolution like *On the Origin of Species* and *the Descent of Man*. The western education compelled Jayesh to ponder upon the ignorance of hill people. He questioned the outlook of his own caste and their bigotry, "What a koop-mandook, frog-in-the-well, attitude we Brahmins have." (Gokhale 131) During his quest to explore the 'modern' Nainital, Jayesh met Rosemary Boden, an English missionary. She was the daughter of the American missionary who managed the leper asylum. The first time he met Rosemary, he was mesmerized by her beauty. He stopped to observe her extraordinary beauty but "did not dare to sit down on the bench beside her- that would have been unthinkable." (Gokhale 131) There was awkwardness between the two due to his brown skin and her English descent.

Namita Gokhale has portrayed the character of Jayesh as a quintessential modern man in colonial period who was introduced to the western education. Education in colonial period became the new symbol of status and opened a whole new perspective towards the new ideas of western world. Almora, the centre of elite class of Kumaon, emerged as an important centre of western education (Randhwa 127-130). Jayesh being a Thuldhoti Brahmin is expected to strictly follow the rituals to prevent the various forms of caste violations. There are different sets of rites that a Brahmin has to follow and it even includes the day-to-day activities. Different castes tend to observe these rituals more or less strictly since transgression from these rules may possibly lead to defilement and certainly to a loss of ritual status. Thus, it is the duty of Jayesh to maintain the purity of his caste status. He was internalized with the fact that as a Brahmin, the twice born caste it is his dharma to protect the sanctity of his caste. However, his deep affection for an English woman may be termed as a divergence from his caste. Jayesh wanted to continue his meeting with Rosemary but also dreaded of his secret being disclosed in front of his family.

The pre-colonial caste system of Kumaon was deconstructed by the British. The new administrative system assigned high posts in the British office to the Europeans. The system of land grants to Thuljats was terminated by the colonial rulers, thus undermining the basis of

their superiority in the Kumaoni social sphere. The subordinated offices were kept for the local people. Education rather than heredity became an important criterion to obtain posts in the British administration. This new arrangement introduced by the British reduced the position of Thuljats in the society. The introduction of western education by British rule proved to be a crucial time which alter the ancient practice of the parameter of social status. The transformation of Kumaoni society led to separation of caste from the status to some extent. Education rather than caste became the new symbol of status. The modern education in fact reached even to the lowest strata of the society. The Christian missionaries provided education to the shilpkars in Kumaon. However, this led to many conversions in Kumaoni society.

Jayesh Pant, the high- born Thuldhote Brahmins nephew of Jeewan Chandra Pant too converted to Christianity and “received baptism at the hands of the Reverend Henry Boden at the Almora Leprosarium” (Gokhale 214). Jayesh’s fall from his high caste status and his love for Rosemary created a confusion in his life. When he reached Jeewnapur House in Almora after returning from Bombay, he realised that even the chhyoda made of cow urine cannot purify him now. He decided to stop lying and speak only the truth to himself and to the whole family. He confronted his feelings and blurted out his truth in front of the whole family. The conversion of Jayesh created a huge outcry in the Pant family. His uncle was deeply perturbed by his act of caste violation. Jayesh had committed a crime in the eyes of Jeewan Chandra Pant by disobeying his traditions. He had violated the dharma of his ancestors. The Vaidya decided to excommunicate his nephew from the Brahmin community.

Jayesh’s act of conversion made Tilottama secretly admire him. Tilottama was a rebel herself. After various futile attempts to break the shackles of caste rules, she was not able to escape from the oppressive customs of high-caste society. The concept of caste has always been defined as structure of exploitation. Both caste and oppression of women has been perceived as a part of the structure of a society. The period of establishment of Brahminical ideology led to the linkage of high caste status to a life of oppression for women. The lives of women were controlled by men using the different aspects of caste hierarchy. High caste woman had to accept the life of subordination and solitude in exchange for their share in the high caste status. Gokhale in the novel *Things to Leave Behind* has documented the centuries old caste system in Kumaon. The rituals and practices of a high born Thuldhote Brahmin and the rigid customs of caste purity governed the status of high caste women in Kumaoni society. The novel tells the story of Brahmin women in Kumaon and their reaction to the whole Brahminical setup. The connection between caste and gender plays a major role in the subordination of upper caste women in Kumaon. Tilottama is portrayed as a rational woman who has always questioned the absurd rules made for upper caste women. She was not very keen to follow the caste rules. The Brahminical ideals prevalent in Kumaoni society led to the development of caste complexities. Consequently, the position of Kumaoni women was further lowered. The traditions and rituals of a Thuldhote Brahmin household, the orthodox notion of caste purity that is passed off as traditions were questioned by Tilottama. The custom to cook food after taking the ritual bath and wearing a single unstitched garment was rejected by her. She considered the customs to be mere “superstition and andhavisvas” (Gokhale 54). Tilottama’s mindset is very well evident that she is challenging the traditional beliefs of Kumaoni caste system.

The inclination of Tilottama towards education made her realize women are bound in the shackles of the customs. Her inclination towards the ideas propagated Pandita Ramabai and reading of her book *The High Caste Hindus* made her contemplate her own position in the society- “Pandita Ramabai’s flouting of every high- caste taboo, her empowerment through education, her defiant inter-caste marriage to Medhvi, her training as a teacher in England and her sojourns to distant lands- these tales all held Tilottama in thrall” (Gokhale 107). Tilottama would long for her freedom to visit the Bara Bazaar in Almora. It was forbidden for her to visit the market alone being a high caste Brahmin woman. The menstruating women were considered ‘unclean’ and were not allowed to enter the kitchen. These rules imposed on women since ages never made sense to her. She would read that Indians were challenging the superstitions prevalent in Indian society. Tilottama who remained a lifelong rebel supported her daughter when Deoki’s husband was excommunicated from his community. She was out raged by the idea of ghata shraddha. In this custom the rituals of death are performed for the person who is excommunicated. Tilottama was against these rituals. She termed those high caste Brahmins as “barbarians!” She was concerned about her daughter who had no idea about this incident and nobody really bothered to tell her about her husband. Tilottama exclaimed, “And what of my daughter? Will they make her a widow? She let out a war cry that echoed through the rafters of her smoky kitchen. Over my dead body or, preferably, theirs!” (Gokhale 211)

Namita Gokhale through this novel has tried to bring to life the unexplored part of Kumaon especially during colonial rule. It is about the time when everything was changing. Gokhale has compiled the stories of Kumaoni women in the book majorly from the real memories and told memories of her family. She has explored the nuances of caste and the British rule. The novel reminds us the histories and memories that are long forgotten. In one of her interviews Gokhale has commented on her thought process behind the novel. She says, “I wanted to show how times change, thought processes change and through all this, how the human heart and the search for love and freedom are a constant. And yes, the past lives on in Kumaon, as it does everywhere, but we have to unearth it from the debris of the present. I'm deeply aware of the vast sense of privilege and entitlement among the Brahmin community and also feel very strongly about the ugliness and injustice of the caste system in India” (Interview). Thus, providing us a different perspective of the caste structure of Kumaon during colonial period.

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