

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO RITUAL RANKING AMONG THE SATAR

Premalata Ghimire
Anthropology Department
Hartwick College

Introduction

Caste is the dominant social system of Nepal. Due to constant interaction between the caste and non-caste people, the hierarchical values of caste system has influenced the behavior of the non-caste people as well. This paper presents the methodology used in determining the influence of caste hierarchy among the Satar of southern Nepal in defining themselves within the larger Satar group and between the Satar and caste groups. It further examines the implications of such influence on the Satar social system. The preliminary fieldwork was carried out for 4 months in January-May, 1985 and the follow-up intensive fieldwork was done for 15 months in 1976-78. This article, however, is based on the first one.

Setting

The Satar and caste people presented in this paper live in Sunauli, a village situated about six miles east of the industrial town of Biratnagar of southern Nepal. Sunauli is one of the eight villages of Sisbani Panchayat. These villages are populated either by a majority of Satar or caste people. Sunauli and its three neighbouring villages include both caste and Satar population. Although both groups are endogamous and patrilineal, they are ethnically and culturally different. Their dress and religious practices differ. Both the Satar and caste people speak entirely different languages. Satari language, spoken by the Satar, belongs to the Munda family of Austro-Asiatic language group. Maithili, spoken by the 90% of the caste people, belongs to the Indo-Aryan language group. The other 10% of the caste people are Nepali Bahun who speak Nepali.

Further, hierarchy is the distinguishing feature of the caste groups, whereas the Satar tradition values egalitarianism. These different ideologies

have affected the quality of interpersonal relations of the members belonging to each of these groups. Members of caste groups believe that their relations with others in and out of their groups must be arranged in an order of dominance and deference, from higher to lower.¹ This is evident from the hierarchical categories of the Bahuns of the neighboring villages. They order all the caste groups of Nepal into three categories. The first one is *Mathillo Jaat* which includes upper caste people, especially the Bahun and Chetri, who are Hindu. The second in order is *Pani Chalne Jaat* which refers to those caste people from whom water can be accepted, meaning that they are touchable. These people can be Hindu or Buddhist. These Bahuns call some people of this category *Matwali* because they (*Matwali*) use alcoholic beverages in their formal and informal rituals.² The third category consists of *Pani Nachalne Jaat*. It includes those people from whom water can not be accepted, meaning that they are untouchable. These people can be Hindu, or non-Hindu.³

Satar, in contrast, tend to see their society as held together by kinship bonds and do not insist on hierarchical ordering. Because of such ordering of social relations, Satar tend to live with or closer to the other members of their groups. The caste people, in contrast, prefer their village to have a culturally heterogeneous population which includes not only other caste people, but other ethnic groups as well:

In spite of these differences, the Satar and the caste people of Sunauli and its vicinity constantly interact with each other. Their contexts of interaction extend from a narrow to a wider range from the village to the town. Further, these contexts are formal and informal, secular and ritual - such as village meetings and festivals, weekly markets, and pilgrimages - which provide ample opportunities for the groups to foster interaction with each other.

Sunauli appears strikingly different from its neighbouring villages in the balance of its population. It has a total population of 376 of which 170 are Satar and 176 are caste people. As is shown in Table 1, Sunauli has sixty households - twenty-seven belonging to the Satar and thirty-three belonging to the caste people.

Table 1: Ethnic Population of the Satar villages

Villages	Satar		Caste	
	population	household	population	household
Birta	45	8	7	2
Kadmaha	47	8	4	1
Kashipur	61	12	8	4
Sunauli	170	27	176	33

There are eleven caste groups in Sunauli. Table 2 explains the distribution of caste population by gender and households. Among all the caste groups the Nunia group is numerically dominant. Also, only the Nunia are divided into two sub-castes - Rajbhar Nunia and Chauhan Nunia.

The Satar comprise the other half of the population of Sunauli. They are divided into nine patrilineal clans. The distribution of their population according to clans and gender is presented in table 3.

The Satar have an egalitarian ideology. This ideology is expressed in various contexts- religious, political, and social. Their egalitarianism, however, is not practiced to the full extent today in Sunauli. This is evident from their economic classes which divide them into rich and poor, and the ritual hierarchy, modelled after the caste hierarchy, which separates them into pure and impure categories. As I have mentioned elsewhere (1990), in native terms, these categories are- Sapha Hod, Bidin Hod, and the Kristan Hod- the Sapha Hod having the highest level of purity and the Christian Satar having lowest one. These categories are further divided into two broad religious categories- Hindu and Christian. In this, the Sapha Hod and the Bidin Hod define themselves as Hindu and perceive themselves as different from the Christian Satar. The Bidin Hod and the Sapha Hod share the view of their caste neighbors that there are only two *Jaat* (kinds of people) on this earth - Hindu and Muslim- and all those who are not Hindu are either Muslim or like the Muslim (Figure 1). Accordingly, they perceive Christians and the Christian Satar as belonging to the Muslim *Jaat*. And since these Bidin Hod and the Sapha Hod do not think of themselves as Muslim, they define themselves as Hindu. Both of them use the label Hindu to distinguish themselves from the Muslims whom they consider outsiders and, therefore, untouchables (See Gaborieau 1972: 84-105 for the ritual status of Muslims in Nepal).

Table 2: Distribution of Caste Population by Gender and Household

Castes	Households	Female	Male	Total
Nunia (Chauhan and Rajbhar)	11	27	25	52
Mohali	8	20	16	36
Kiyat	2	9	8	17
Teli	3	4	10	14
Kevarat	1	7	6	13
Sonar	2	6	6	12
Gangai	1	4	6	10
Chamar	1	6	3	9
Halwai	1	3	5	8
Dhanuk	1	1	1	2
Kurmi	1	1	1	2
?	1	0	1	1
	33	88	88	176

Table 3: Distribution of the Satar population by gender and clan

clans	female	male	total
Marndi	23	18	41
Soren	16	16	32
Murmu	15	8	23
Tudu	10	11	21
Hemram	9	9	18
Hansdak	6	13	19
Baske	4	4	8
Kisku	4	2	6
Paunri	0	1	1
?	1	0	1
	88	82	170

In spite of these hierarchies, the Satar of Sunauli constantly emphasize their egalitarian values and deny that any such hierarchy exists. The apparent inconsistency between the Satar's claim of egalitarianism and the reality of the village's social structure led me to administer a "self-ranking" task among the Satar and caste people. The objective of the ranking task was to determine the prevalence of caste values among the Satar. The

other purpose was to identify the criteria used in ranking and in the maintenance of boundaries of each category and group.

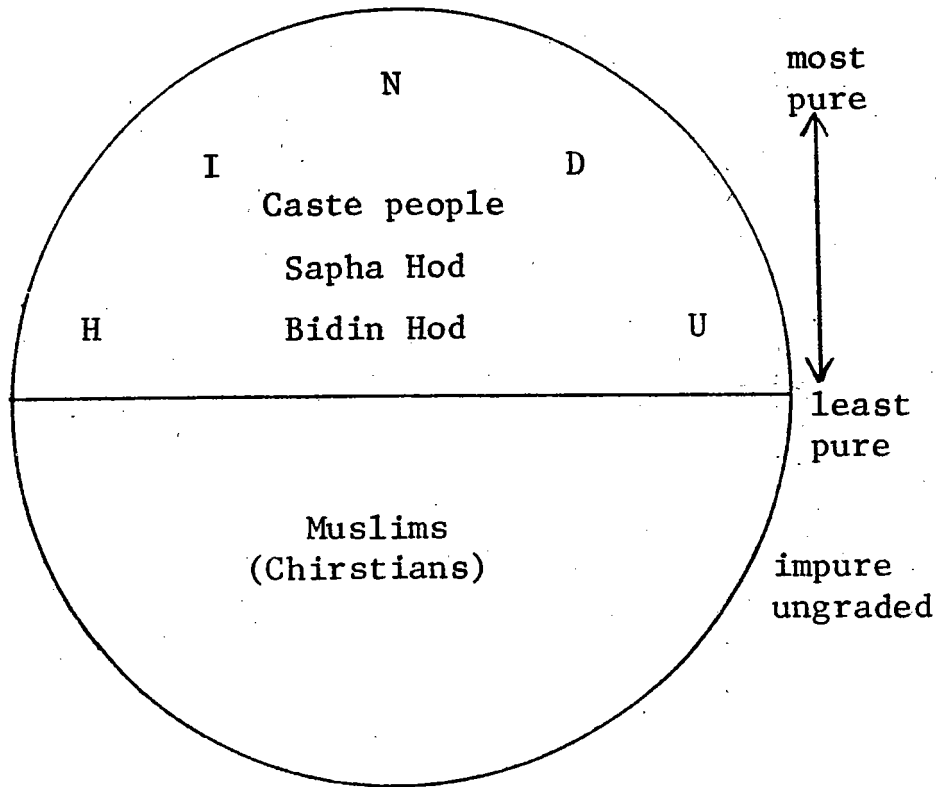


Figure 1: World-view of the Satar and the caste people

Methodology

I followed Silverman's (1966) model in conducting the ranking task. First, I discussed the different ritual categories of the Satar group and the caste groups with six elderly Satar and two caste men. These men belonged to different ritual and class categories within their larger Satar and caste groups. I could not include women in this discussion because they were very reluctant to talk about ranking at this early stage. Then I wrote down the names of these categories and the names of the caste groups on separate cards, and asked my informants to sort them in a "ranking order" from "higher" to "lower". At the end of each task, I asked open ended questions (Pelto and Pelto 1970/1979) of each informant about his criteria of ranking the Satar and the caste groups of Sunauli. Each talked about the importance of political, economic, ritual, and educational factors but unanimously agreed that the ritual criterion of *Sapha/non-Sapha* (pure/impure) played the key role in determining an individual's status. Such criterion of hierarchy has also

been examined by some Indianists in their studies of caste system (Dumont 1966/1980; Gough 1960; Marriott 1968/1970).

Now that I was quite clear about the range of specific responses for this ranking task, I wrote down the criteria of ranking in the following order-economic, political, ritual, occupational (government or any office job), and educational, and asked my informants to choose one or more of them. The purpose of such closed question was both to save time and get accurate answers. For this project, I hired two assistants - a Satar and a caste. Both of them worked with the literate members of Sunauli and its surrounding villages while I worked with the illiterate ones. I followed up this ranking task by interviewing all the informants of Sunauli, literate and illiterate, eight years old and above, concerning their criteria used in ranking as well as in maintaining the boundaries of their own social groups.

Factors relating to ranking

The variables which played a significant role in ranking both within and between groups were age, class, gender, ritual status, and ethnicity. Children (between the age of 8-14) of both groups possessed little knowledge about the relative statuses of the caste groups. However, while the caste children could rank a few caste groups of Sunauli, especially their status in relation to the Mohali and the Chamar, the Satar children could not.

Among men, older men could rank more caste groups than the younger ones. I encountered some problem in the beginning with the young men (age 15-30) of both groups. These men did not cooperate with me by insisting that all villagers were of equal status, and that they did not believe in the relative superiority or inferiority of caste groups. These young men expressed this belief of equality by eating together, especially boiled rice and meat or fish, in various informal contexts. However, as I continued interviewing the older people, this situation changed, and the young men took interest in ranking their caste groups. Caste men took this task more seriously and were more concerned about it than the Satar men of the same age category. Although the caste men still overtly denied their belief in the ritual hierarchy, they participated fully in this task "for the sake of their children" so that their children would know about their own ritual status in order to marry within their own caste groups. These caste men could rank all the caste groups of Sunauli and the Satar as well. Although most of them agreed to the lower status of the Satar than that of the caste groups, none of them agreed with each other in the relative statuses of the various caste groups. Further, the members of each caste considered their own ritual status to be higher than that of other caste groups.

Among the Satar, ethnicity, class, ritual and religious identities were meaningful in ranking. As I will demonstrate later in this paper, Satar verbally deny viewing themselves as being a part of the caste society at any level. During my informal interviews with them, they repeatedly expressed their ignorance about the caste groups and their relationship with them in terms of each other's ritual statuses. The data gathered through the ranking task, however, point in another direction. In this task, most of the Satar ranked Bahuns as having the highest ritual status

Table 4: Satar ranking themselves with the Diku

Population by	higher than	lower than	no
gender and class (age 8 and above)	Diku (N= 97)	Diku (N= 32)	respond (N= 10)
Total population (N= 139)	70 %	23%	7%
Female (N= 74)	70%	24%	6%
Male (N= 65)	69%	22%	9%
Upper class (N= 18)	67%	28%	5%
Female (N= 10)	70%	30%	0%
Male (N= 8)	62%	0%	38%
Lower class (N= 121)	68%	22%	10%
Female (N= 65)	69%	23%	8%
Male (N= 56)	70%	19%	11%

Table 5: Satar ranking the caste groups of Sunauli

Population by	ranking more	ranking less	no
gender and class (age 8 and above)	than four caste groups (N= 61)	than four caste groups (N= 68)	respond (N= 10)
Total population (N= 139)	44%	49%	7%
Female (N= 74)	31%	62%	7%
Male (N= 65)	57%	33%	10%

Upper class (N= 18)	61%	11%	28%
Female (N= 10)	50%	50%	0%
Male (N= 8)	75%	25%	0%
Lower class (N= 121)	40%	47%	13%
Female (N= 65)	26%	65%	9%
Male (N= 56)	59%	30%	11%

in the caste hierarchy. While ranking themselves with the caste groups of Sunauli (Diku)⁴, 70% of the Satar men and women of both classes ranked their ethnic group as higher than all the caste groups. 23% of them ranked themselves as higher than the Mohali and the Chamar but lower than the rest of the caste groups (Table 4).

These Satar could also grade the caste groups in an hierarchical order. Of 139 Satar, 44% could rank more than four castes of Sunauli and 49% could rank at least the caste groups of the Teli, Mohali and Chamar (Table 5). This 49% labeled the rest of caste people as *Diku* and could not rank them at all.

As Table 5 illustrates, class differences were also significant in such ranking. Upper class people, both male and female, could rank more than four caste groups of Sunauli. The upper class Satar were educated and multilingual. They exerted their power in various ritual and secular contexts. They had large amount of land holdings and they always entertained their urban guests, especially the government officials and the police. These wealthy Satar frequently visited the nearby town Biratnagar, and were in constant interaction with the caste people of the wider region. Because of their contact and continuous interaction with these caste people, the upper class people were more aware of the dominance of caste system and the ritual differences existing between the caste groups of the Sunauli.

Religious identity was the other salient factor among the Satar in ranking themselves within their group. As the data indicate, more than 80% of the Sapha Hod and the Bidin Hod ranked themselves as higher than the Christian Satar (Table 6). To repeat again, these Hindu Satar considered themselves as higher in the level of purity. They designated the Christian Satar as lowest in ritual status and, therefore, untouchable.

Gender difference also appeared significant in such ranking. More upper class men than women could rank more than four caste groups of Sunauli. Although this is a significant point, its discussion is not covered in this paper. Further research is needed to examine the gender identities of the Satar and the caste people.

Women also participated in ranking the Satar and caste groups. Among these women, the caste women were able to rank most of the caste groups of Sunauli. These women, like all the caste men and children, ranked the caste groups only along the ritual criterion of purity and impurity. They took a deeper interest in ranking the various caste groups of Sunauli. These caste women firmly believed in ritual inequality, and considered the ritual status of their own caste group as higher than any other caste group of Sunauli. They were also very blunt and open about their own statuses vis a vis each other. Once or twice, such openness in the part of caste women resulted in bitter argument and verbal fights among the members of different caste groups. Although these women showed "tremendous knowledge" about the caste statuses of Sunauli, they knew very little about the ritual categories of the Satar. They viewed all Satar belonging to one social group, and ranked this entire group as untouchable.

Unlike the caste women, most of the Satar women showed their ignorance in ranking the caste groups. As shown in Table 4, they labeled all castes as *Diku* and ranked themselves higher than the caste people by using the criterion of ritual purity and pollution. Among the Satar women one's own ritual status appeared to be significant in ranking others. The higher one's status was within the group, the more tendency one showed to rank other Satar as lower in status. For example, the women of the Sapha Hod households ranked themselves as higher than the other Satar, putting the Bidin Hod in the middle of the ritual hierarchy, and the Christian Satar in the lowest ritual order, the untouchable. These Sapha Hod women also used the criterion of ritual purity and impurity in ranking themselves. Though the women of Bidin Hod households agreed with the untouchable status of the Christian Satar, they disagreed with the Sapha Hod about their own status. These Bidin Hod women considered their own ritual status to be equal to that of the Sapha Hod. Furthermore, the Bidin Hod women used two different criteria for ranking themselves within their ethnic group—the ritual criterion of the caste system to rank the Christian Satar as lowest in status, and the economic criterion of wealth to rank themselves as lower than the Sapha Hod.

Table 6: Satar ranking themselves within their ethnic group

Population by gender and class (age 8 and above)	Hindu Satar higher than Christian Satar (N= 120)	Hindu Satar lower than Christian Satar (N= 9)	No respond (N= 10)
Total population (N= 139)	86%	7%	7%
Female (N= 74)	85%	10%	5%
Male (N= 65)	89%	3%	8%
Upper class (N= 18)	77%	6%	17%
Female (N= 10)	90%	10%	0%
Male (N= 8)	75%	0%	25%
Lower class (N= 121)	81%	10%	9%
Female (N= 65)	78%	12%	10%
Male (N= 56)	88%	5%	7%

Analysis

This ranking task revealed the complexity of the Satar social system. Some of the facts made obvious from this ranking task are as follows. This first one relates to the concept of caste and the extreme and milder forms of ranking the various groups; the second one explains the pervasiveness of the caste values among the Satar; and the third factor relates to the definition of being Hindu. The first two explain how the Satar have incorporated the caste values in defining themselves within and between groups. The third component illustrates their strategy to maintain their group autonomy by labelling themselves as Hindu.

Concept of caste and its forms of ranking

As illustrated by various anthropological literature on caste, it can be studied both as a social group and as a system of social relations. As a system of social relations the distinguishing feature of caste is hierarchy. It divides society into a number of relatively self-contained and segregated units between which the relationship is determined by the hierarchical order. The criterion of such ordering is the ritual status of *Sapha/non-Sapha*

(purity/pollution). The caste people of Sunauli view themselves as a part of such a system and define their relationship with the members of the other caste groups in a hierarchical way. As a result, one caste group is never perceived as equal to an other caste group; it is either higher or lower.

The ranking of caste/Satar groups as higher and lower takes two forms-extreme and mild. These forms, as my data indicate, depend to a great extent on the ritual status of the individual ranking the groups. For example, the higher the ritual status of a caste group is, the more tendency its members have to rank the caste groups in the extreme form of *Saphal/Achoot* (Maithili classification- meaning pure/untouchable) or *Pani Chalne/Pani Nachalne Jaat* (Nepali classification- meaning those caste groups from whom water can or cannot be accepted). In contrast, the lower one's ritual status is, the more tendency one shows to rank other caste groups in the milder form of *Saphal non-Sapha* (pure-impure or higher/lower) and not necessarily as *Saphal/Achoot* or *Pani Chalne/Pani Nachalne Jaat*. I will illustrate and discuss this below.

The Bahun informants of the vicinity define themselves as belonging to the *Mathillo Jaat*. They mark all the caste groups of Sunauli, except the Halwai caste group (sweet-maker), and the Satar as *Pani Nachalne Jaat* and maintain a great degree of social distance from them.

The caste people of Sunauli are least influenced by the ranking procedure of their Bahun neighbours. Although they accept the ritual status of the Bahun as the highest in the ritual hierarchy, they do not agree with the Bahun's ranking *them* (the caste group of Sunauli) as *Pani Nachalne Jaat*. My ranking data indicate that most of the caste people of Sunauli (71%) view their status as *Pani chalne* or *Sapha* and follow the extreme ranking pattern of the above Bahun. And, therefore, they rank the caste groups of Sunauli as *Saphal/Achoot* (Table 7). They include the Satar, Mohali and Chamar in their *Achoot* category.

Among the Satar, the Mohali, and the Chamar, the Satar do not agree with the other caste people about their status as lower than that of the caste people. As mentioned earlier, most of them view the caste people's status as lower than their own, and use a milder form of ranking, seeing them as *non-Sapha*. The Mohali and the Chamar, however, do accept their own status as lower in the caste hierarchy. Like other caste people, the members of both these groups consider the status of their own caste group as higher than that of the other's. But unlike these other caste people, the Mohali and the Chamar do not identify each other as *Achoot*. Rather, they use a milder form of ranking in terms of *Saphal non-Sapha*.

Table 7: Caste people (excluding the Mohali) ranking caste groups as Achhoot/non-Sapha/equal

Population by gender and class (age 8 and above)	Sapha/Achhoot (N= 66)	Sapha/non-Sapha (N= 9)	equal (N= 1)	no respond. (N= 17)
Total population (N= 93)	71%	10%	1%	18%
Female (N= 44)	73%	0%	0%	27%
Male (N= 49)	70%	18%	2%	10%
Upper class (N= 27)	74%	15%	7%	4%
Female (N= 12)	83%	0%	0%	17%
Male (N= 15)	67%	13%	7%	13%
Lower class (N= 66)	70%	11%	0%	19%
Female (N= 32)	78%	0%	0%	22%
Male (N= 34)	71%	21%	0%	8%

These data indicate how much the ritual criterion of purity/pollution governs the caste people's behavior in defining their social relationships with each other in hierarchical terms. They view each caste group as separate from the other and consider it their goal to maintain the purity of their own caste group. Two ways in which this is done in Sunauli is by observing the rules of commensality (not sharing certain boiled or fried food with other caste people) and by practicing endogamy. Endogamy is also practiced by the members of two subcastes of the Nunia caste group.

Members of each of these subcaste groups marry among themselves, not with other members of their larger caste group. Such marriage practices enable the caste people to remain *Sapha* by not mixing their blood and semen with the members of other caste groups (see Inden 1976 and Marriott 1976 for Hindu views about bodily substances). This practice also separates them from other caste groups. This separateness is then further symbolized and acted out through various rules of commensality, as is also demonstrated by Marriott in his study of Kishangathi people (1968/1970).

Pervasiveness of caste values

Another factor that becomes obvious from the self-ranking task is the perpetuation of the caste values among the egalitarian Satar. My data indicate that despite their verbal denial of being in the caste system, the Satar view the caste system as all pervasive and encompassing. Constant interaction with the caste people, both in and out of Sunauli, and the tension and conflicts emerging from such interaction, also provide a base for the Satar to view the caste system as the dominant social system of Nepal. This view of the caste system influences their behaviour in ranking themselves not only with their caste neighbours, but also with the members of their own ethnic group. They reveal the values of the caste system in ranking themselves within the larger Satar group. For example, the Sapha Hod deny being a part of the caste system and deny being untouchable but designate the Bidin Hod as belonging to a lower ritual status and the Christian Satar as untouchable. Although the Bidin Hod do not agree with the Sapha Hod's claim to be ritually higher in status, they do agree with them that Christian Satar are untouchable and ritually lower in status than both the Sapha Hod and the Bidin Hod.

Such implicit consensus with the hierarchical values of the caste system which serves to define their intergroups and intragroup relations is prevalent among the Christian Satar as well.⁵ Although the Christian Satar do not agree with the Sapha Hod and the Bidin Hod ranking of them as untouchable, they do view themselves within a hierarchical scheme. As Christians, they deny being Hindu or being a part of the caste system, but do rank themselves with a few other caste groups. In this ranking, they consider the Mohali (Basket-makers) and the Chamar (Leather-worker) as lower in ritual rank than themselves. Like the other Satar, the Christian Satar also use the ritual criterion of *Sapha/non-Sapha* in ranking themselves with these other caste people.

The implicit consensus with the ritual values of the caste system has a profound effect on the Satar social system. It has created heterogeneous categories within their homogeneous group. The nature of these categories is complex especially because in Sunauli caste and class provide two models of behavior. Caste relates to ritual status while class relates to secular status. Although they are different models, they can function at the same time. In the context of Sunauli, they must be viewed as interrelated. Such interrelatedness of the ritual and economic statuses reflects the complexity of the Satar social system and makes it hard to describe it in a lineal sense. Such a situation also contributes to our understanding that not all behavior can be interpreted as being exclusively caste relevant in *the* caste societies.

This is evident from the way Satar rank themselves within their group in terms of both economic and political power.

The trend towards hierarchy which is evident among the Satar of Sunauli challenges the tradition of studying Satar as a uniform group. Among all the tribal groups of India, the Santal are the most widely studied so far (Troisi 1976). Most of these studies present them as a uniform cultural group (see Agrawal 1977; Biswas 1956; Kochar 1970; Mahapatra 1986; Majumdar 1956; Mukherjee 1960; Somers 1976; Orans 1965; Prasad 1972, 1974; and Troisi 1978). These studies examine the Satar interacting with other groups. While they explore the changing or unchanging traditions of the Santal, they typically treat any unchanged social unit as a uniform cultural group and any changed unit as one which is in the process of "dying out" or being "adsorbed". Although a few studies of the seventies raise the issue of Santal identity and give a brief description of their ritual categories, these are more concerned with cultural persistence than change (Kochar 1970 and Troisi 1978). The studies done on the Satar of Nepal also follow the above pattern of studying the Satar as sharing a set of cultural norms (Bista 1967/1976; Shrestha 1964-65, 1971). So far, only a few studies on the Satar have examined culture change and diversity among them. One such study is by Orans (1965) who explores the dynamics of culture change by demonstrating the impact of market economy and industrialization on the Santal social structure.

In my opinion, diversity in the form of social categories based on caste rituals will emerge in Nepal whenever an egalitarian group interacts with a dominant group that has the non-egalitarian caste ideology. Such interaction breaks the homogeneous egalitarian group into various heterogeneous sub-groups or categories which incorporate the characteristics of the caste ideology and, thereby, encourage the members of these categories to maintain social distance from each other.

The ritual categories of the Satar illustrates that such diversity is already in existence within their social group. This diversity has not been studied much because of the normative orientation of the native anthropologists. In order to observe and analyze this heterogeneity, we need to bring a shift in our approach towards understanding the various cultural systems - a shift that helps us focus on individuals and not just groups on the interests and strategies of individuals in the pursuit of certain goals and not just their cultural norms and values, and on the tensions and conflicts with the members of their larger group and the surrounding social groups regarding these interests and strategies. The native anthropologists of South Asia have yet to work in this direction - we have yet to come out of the grip of certain Western models. We have to stop viewing societies like those of

the Satar as passive, traditional, and unchanging. Only then we will be able to explore the dynamic potential of these societies, the positive nature of culture change, and heterogeneity within homogeneity.

Definition of being a Hindu

The third factor revealed by the ranking data is related to defining oneself as a Hindu. As mentioned earlier, the Bidin Hod and the Sapha Hod perceived themselves as Hindus. As Hindus, they share many things in common and, therefore, are closer to each other than each is to the Christian Satar. Further, as Hindus, they define their ritual status as higher than that of the Christian Satar and, therefore, maintain a great degree of social distance from them. The caste people, who identify themselves as Hindu, also recognize the heterogeneity existing within the Satar group. However, they are more aware of the religious categories of the Hindu versus the Christian Satar, than with the ritual categories of the Sapha Hod and the Bidin Hod. These caste people perceive all the non-Christian Satar (the Sapha Hod and the Bidin Hod) as Hindu Satar.

Although the Sapha Hod and the caste people define themselves and each other as Hindu, the label "Hindu" has different meanings for them. For the caste people, the criterion of being a Hindu is birth. In other words, to be a Hindu means to be born into a caste group and be a caste member. Although behavior is important to define oneself as a member of a particular caste group and as a Hindu, it is secondary. For the Satar, behavior is the primary criterion for being a Hindu. It is the behavior, a particular set of manners and rituals, which distinguishes them from the Muslims. Any alteration in behavior brings a change in the Satar identity from a Hindu to a non-Hindu and is, therefore, highly disapproved of by the Satar. For the Satar then there is no correlation between being a Hindu and being a member of the caste society. One is possible without the other.

When looked at from outside these differences of opinion do not seem to have created much tension between the Sapha Hod, the Bidin Hod and the caste people. As Hindu, the members of both Satar and caste groups often overlook their cultural identities while interacting with each other or while participating in certain events, such as pilgrimages, village festivals, or meetings.

But when looked at from the inside, the status difference between the Satar and the caste people is quite obvious in the way they keep social distance from each other. While accepting the Satar as Hindu, the caste people also think of the Satar as belonging to a lower ritual status than the caste people. These caste people place all the Satar at the bottom of their ritual hierarchy and designate them as *Achoot*. From the caste people's point

of view, this helps them define their relationship with the Satar more positively as Hindu.

A caste view of society incorporates ethnic groups by giving them a proper place in the caste hierarchy according to the dietary practices and/or occupations of the members of these groups. It is the concept of such inclusiveness or incorporation which has led the caste people of Sunauli to view the Satar as belonging to their caste system, and to rank them as "untouchable" because of their particular dietary practices of eating field-mice, pork, and beef and their use of alcohol in all their rituals. My data indicate that from the Satar point of view the status which has been given to them may or may not have any significance. Thus, in spite of living together with the caste people, they do not view themselves as untouchable and retain their own cultural values and identity with a strong sense of pride.

It is for this reason that for a Satar to be a Hindu does not necessarily mean to follow the Hindu rituals as practised by the caste people who are Hindu. A Satar, a Bidin Hod or a Sapha Hod, wants to identify himself as a Hindu mainly to distinguish himself from a Muslim or a Christian. Such identity enables him to maintain a greater degree of social distance from the members of these two religious groups. It also helps him to create and maintain closer ties with the caste people whose dominance saturates the economic, political, and social domains in the region. The strategic use of the Hindu identity, thus, allows a Satar to maintain a close interaction with the caste people. At the same time, such an identity enables him to distinguish himself from a caste member and assert his own ethnic identity. Because of this strategic use of the Hindu identity, a Satar does not see any correlation between being a Hindu and being a member of the caste society.

Conclusion

To sum up, the social milieu of the Satar is not isolated. They participate in the world around them. The implications of such participation are many. This paper has examined three such implications which were uncovered by conducting a ranking task. The first two implications are related to the concept of caste, its forms of ranking, and the pervasiveness of caste values among the Satar. These illustrate the dominant and inclusive nature of the caste system and its profound effect on the Satar social structure. This is evident from the Satars participation in the caste rituals and the existing heterogeneous categories within their homogeneous group. The third factor revealed by the ranking task indicates the social distance between the caste people and the Satar. It illustrates that although both the Satar and the caste people perceive themselves as Hindu, they have different meanings associated with this label. For the caste people, to be a Hindu means to be

born into a caste group. for the Satar, to be a Hindu means to behave like a Hindu (or a non-Muslim), and not necessarily to be a caste member. Such strategic use of the term "Hindu" allows the Satar to be a part of the wider Hindu society without entirely compromising their ethnic status.

Notes

- 1 Mandelbaum (1970) also points this out in his study of change and continuity in the caste society of India.
- 2 During 1978 and 1985, there were no *Matwali* in or around Sunauli.
- 3 Haimendorf (1966) and Levine (1987) also present such hierarchical categories in their studies of the Chhetri caste group and other ethnic groups of Nepal. See Hamilton 1819; Gray 1983; and Jones and Jones 1976 on untouchables of Nepal.
- 4 Satar use different terms of reference for the cast people of Nepal and India. Their *Mundo* category includes all the Nepali speaking caste people and all the ethnic groups of Nepal whose members may or may not speak Nepali as their mother tongue, such as the Sherpa, Tharu, Limbu, Rai, Tamang, Newar, Dhimal, and Magar. *Diku* literally means outlaw. It was used by the Santal of India for the Indian caste people especially when the caste people exploited the Santal as servants and wage laborers, and forced them into free (slave) labor. Today, the Satar of Sunauli use this label for the Indians and the Indian language speaking people of Nepal such as the Bengali, Marwadi, and Maithil people.

References

- Agrawal, Binod C, 1977. "Interaction between Tribes and non-Tribes." In *Tribal Heritage of India (vol. 1) : Ethnicity, Identity and Interaction*. S. C. Dube, ed. pp. 118-140. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Bista, Dor B. 1967. *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Biswas, P.C., 1956. *Santals of the Santal Parganas*. Delhi: Bhartiya Adimjati Sewak Sangh.
- Dumont, Luis 1966/1980. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Furer-Haimendorf, C. Von 1966. "Unity and Diversity in the Chhetri Caste of Nepal." In *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India, and Ceylon*. C. Von furer-Haimendorf, ed. pp. 11-67. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

- Gaborieau, Marc, 1972. "Muslims in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 4: 84-105
- Ghimire, Premalate, 1990. "The Individual and Group Identity of the Sapha Hod". In *Himalaya: Past & Present*. M. P. Joshi, A.C. Fanger, & C. W. Brown, ed. pp. 66-91. Almora: Shree Almora Book Depot.
- Gough, Kathleen. 1960. "Caste in a Tanjore Village." In *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*. E. R. Leach, ed. pp. 11-60. Cambridge papers in Social Anthropology, no. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, John. 1983. "Domestic Enterprise and Social Relations in a Nepalese Village." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 17 (2): 245 - 274.
- Hamilton, F. 1819. *An account of the Kingdom of Nepal*. Edinburgh.
- Inden, Ronald B. 1976. *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jones, Rex and Shirley K. Jones 1976. *The Himalayan Woman: A Study of Limbu women in Marriage and Divorce*. Palo alto: May field Publishig Co.
- Kochar, Vijay K. 1970. *Social Organization among the Santal*. Calcutta: Editions Indian.
- Levine, Nancy E. 1987. "Caste, State and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal." *Journal of Asian Studies* 46 (1): pp. 71-88.
- Mahapatra, Sitakanta 1986. *Modernization and Ritual: Identity and change in Santal Society*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.
- Majumdar, D.N. 1956. *The Santal: A Study in Cultural Change*. Calcutta: Manager of Publications, Government of India Press.
- Mandelbaum, David G. 1970. *Society in India: Change and Continuity*. vol. I and II. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Marriott, McKim (1968) 1970). "Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis." In *Structure and Change in Indian Society*. M. Singer & B.S. Cohen, ed. pp. 133-172. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.
- _____, 1976. "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism." In *Transactions and Meaning*. B. Kapferer, ed. pp. 109-142. Philadelphia: ISHI.
- Moffatta, Michael 1979. *An Untouchable Community in South India: structure & Consensus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mukherjee, Bhabananda 1960. "Santals in Relation to Hindu Castes". *Man in India* 40 (4): 300-306.
- Orans, Martin 1965. *The Santals: a Tribe in Search of a Great Tradition*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Pelto, P.J. and G.H. Pelto 1970/1979. *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prasad, Saiseshwar 1972. "Inter-Tribal Conflict in Santhal Pargannas." *Journal of Social Research* 15 (1): 38-46.
- 1974: *Where the Three Tribes Meet: A Study in Tribal Interaction*. Allahabad: Indian International Publications.
- Shrestha, Swayambhu L. 1964. *Jhapa ka Satar - Ek Parichaya*. Kathmandu: Gorkhapatra.
- _____, 1971. *Hami Nepali*. Lalitpur: Shrestha Prakashan.
- Silverman, Sydel, 1966. "An Ethnographic Approach To Social Stratification: Prestige in a Central Italian Community." *American Anthropologist* 68 (4): 899-921.
- Somers, George E. 1976. *The Dynamics of Santal Traditions in a Peasant Society*. New Delhi: Abhinava Publications.
- Troisi, J. 1978. *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.