

NOTES ON LAGI-LAGITYA RELATIONS IN JUMLA

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A deeply rooted prominent feature of inter-caste economic interdependency in Jumla is long-term hereditary contractual labor relations known as *lagi-lagitya*. This relation is called *riti-bhagya* (Cameron, 1997:77) in far west Nepal and *hali pratha* in west and east Nepal. It is based on the traditional feudalistic Hindu *jajmani* (patron-client) system of caste-specific task specialization. *Lagi* is a patron or landlord and *lagitya* is a ploughman. In Jumla, men from Buddhist communities plow their agricultural fields themselves. Similar is the case among *matawali* Chhetris who occupy the dry slopes of higher valleys called *pawai*. Unlike many other *Bahun*, *Thakuris* and *Chhetris*, these communities have less cultural restrictions to work in agricultural fields. The Hindu religious ideology does not prohibit them to plow their fields. The absence of low caste occupational groups in their communities, the shortage of agricultural lands, and the poor material conditions are also operative forces for these communities to plow their fields by themselves.

Among *Bahun*, *Thakuri* and *Chhetri* communities, who occupy lower valleys of Tila, Sinja and Pansayadara and own most parts of irrigated lands called *Jiula*, men do not plow their agricultural lands themselves. For them, agricultural works in general and plowing in particular are ritually polluting. In order to plow their fields, they establish a special economic relation with low caste people who live close to their area.

In Jumla *lagityas* come from low caste groups (*dalit*), mainly from *Kami* (black smith) and *Sarki* (leather working) communities. Because low caste groups own very small plots of agricultural lands and produce very little grain, they need to work as *lagityas* for their higher caste landlords to supplement their own agricultural produce. They plow the agricultural fields of *Bahun*, *Thakuris* and *Chhetris*. Depending upon the quantity of agricultural lands of their landlords they plow, *lagityas* receive four to five *supas* (winnowing basket) in the amount of 16 to 20 kg. of grain called *khalo* on seasonal basis for their services. Some *lagityas* get a small piece of irrigated land worth one *muri* of paddy called *badike* from their landlords in exchange of their *khalo*. In addition to *khalo*, *lagitya* also get a bundle of paddy plant called *athaline* during rice harvest. He is also given food and snacks during his work and other festive occasions. Moreover, he is given a pair of clothes once a year and other support during emergency periods.

There are two types of *lagitya*. Those untouchable men who work for their landlords and get *khalo* are called *lagitya* and those untouchable men who work for their landlords and get small plot of land for cultivation are called *badike*. Traditionally, *lagitya* and *badike's* works start with the preparation of agricultural fields in Fagan (March/April) and go on until harvesting barley and transplanting paddy in jeshth (May/June) and harvesting paddy in October/November. During agricultural peak season, other family members, particularly wives of *lagitya* and *badike* work in the agricultural fields of their husbands' landlords on daily wage basis.

The *Lagitya* relation is obligatory and tradition-bound. It is a deeply rooted hereditary long-term contractual arrangement characterized by customary rights and responsibilities (Bishop, 1990: 186). Within these rights and responsibilities, low caste people have rights to employment. Under most circumstances, a patron will not and cannot replace the low caste *lagitya* with another family of the same caste; the relationships cannot be so

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easily terminated (see Cameron, 1998:77 for details). A low caste *lagitya* also cannot work for another patron so long as the relations exist. *lagitya* relation is inheritable. Like their parental properties, sons of *lagityas* inherit their *lagis* as a share from their father during their separation from their parental home. But the *badike* relation is contractual. This type of relation is established for a fixed period of time. Its continuation depends upon mutual contractual understanding. It may go for years or may terminate as soon as the understanding between landlord and *badike* breaks. But once an agreement is made, *badike* must work for his landlord at least for one agricultural season. In total *badike* works for 16-20 days a year for one *muri* of his *badike* land. His work includes plowing and preparing agricultural fields, sowing seeds, transplanting paddy plants, weeding, harvesting, threshing, storing grain and carrying paddy straws to the cattle shed. Traditionally, the agreement with the *badike* is made during *shripanchami*, a Hindu winter festival that falls in late January. Jumli people believe that *shripanchami* is an auspicious day to start a new business.

Perhaps the most longstanding and tradition-bound *lagi-lagitya* relations are those between higher caste and lower-caste people for caste-specific artisan products. In Jumla, the Kami makes and repair agricultural tools, such as hoe, shovel, sickle, axes and cooking utensils for higher caste *lagi* households and in return, they get two to three *Jumli pathi*¹ of grain as *khalo* on a seasonal basis from their *lagi* households. Their wives help them deliver artisan products to their landlords's houses and collect *khalo* from there. Similarly, Damai sews new clothes and repairs

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¹ One *Jumli pathi* contains 4 *manas* of grain equivalent of 2 kg.

old ones, and gets two to three *jumli pathi* of grain as *laja* on a seasonal basis from his *lagi* households. Because in some villages there are no occupational caste groups, the demand for their caste specific services is very high. In order to meet caste-specific services, landlords invite these occupational caste groups from other villages and pay them more *khalo*. Damais from Talium village, for example, go to Lhorpa, Patmara, Guthigaon, Muduri, Dillichaur, Luma, Lamri and Chautha to provide their caste-specific services. Their wives accompany them to help deliver finished clothes to the households of their landlords and collect *laja* and other food items from these households. On average one Kami and one Damai have 10-12 higher caste households as their *lagis*. But some of them have even more than 30 households as *lagis*. The Kamis work in their own houses, but the Damais move from house to house to serve their *lagis*. Damais are also traditional musicians. They provide musical services to all caste groups during marriage ceremonies and other ritual occasions and get their wages either in cash or in grain. During leisure time, some Damai people make *sulpa* (big tobacco pipes) and sell them to their *lagi*.

Traditionally, Sarkis used to make shoes for higher caste people on the basis of *lagi-lagitya* relations. But these days the traditional *lagi-lagitya* relations between Sarkis and their upper caste landlords do not exist any more. Like in other parts of Nepal, the construction of roads to Nepal's northern borders from Tibetan side and Indian borders from Nepal's side and massive supply of ready made shoes from Indian and Chinese markets have adverse effects on the traditional artisan works of Sarki people. As a result, people of Jumla have now permanently adopted wearing the imported ready made shoes from Nepal, India and China. Also, there is a lack of raw materials (particularly cow hide and leather processing chemicals) and

lack of modern equipment to make new shoes² which have greatly affected the Sarki's traditional occupation (cf. Cameron, 1998). Few Sarkis are now engaged in repairing old shoes in Khalanga Bazaar to maintain their livelihood. A Sarki in Khalanga Bazaar can earn up to Rs. 200 from this work. But this is not enough to support his family economy. Therefore, Sarkis are the most vulnerable communities for their artisan products in Jumla. Seddon et al. (1979) report even worse conditions for Sarkis from the central west Nepal. This has forced them to change their traditional occupations. These days, Sarkis work as *lagityas*, daily wage laborers, carpenters and masons to earn their bread. They also make a special kind of threshing sticks called *jalelauro* and sell them to higher caste people to supplement their earnings. There are other occupational caste groups in Jumla as well, but their numbers are very small. There are a few Oudh and Sunar households, who establish marriage relations with the Kami caste. The Oudhs work as carpenters and masons. Sunars are economically in an advantageous position for their work as goldsmiths. They make gold and silver jewelry for marriage and gift purposes.

All low caste people do not necessarily have artisan skills and thus they do not produce artisan products even for their own use. Low caste people who do not produce artisan products themselves establish *lagi-lagitya* relations with those low caste people who produce them.

Lately, *lagitya* and *badike* relations are slowly declining as a result of multiplicity of factors. Many high caste people told that they can no longer keep *lagitya* and *badike* relations with low caste people due to shortage of agricultural lands. The shortage of agricultural lands restricts the high caste landlords in their ability to pay their *lagityas* more. Similarly, low caste

² In Jumla high caste Hindu people bury cows after their death. This deprives Sarkis of an important food resource and of the hides for making leather shoes.

people told me that *lagitya* work is not profitable. Compared to their long hour services, they get less from their landlords not sufficient to support their family. Unlike their fathers and forefathers, younger generations also do not want to work as *lagityas*, because *lagitya* is labor-intensive work for less return. It is also a form of exploitation and domination by higher caste people over the low caste people. So young people from low caste communities prefer to work in other places. But there are no work opportunities for these people in the region. The Lack of work opportunities has forced many young people from these communities to migrate to India for better economic pursuit. Village people told me that each year the degree of out-migration is increasing. Thus, out-migration has become a recurrent phenomenon among the poor and low caste people in Jumla. This phenomenon has great impact on the local technology, economy and society of Jumla.

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