

Research Article

Visible Weapons, Invisible Woes: The Question of Caste in Darjeeling Hills

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2022.7049>

Abstract

The traditional khukuri is an important cultural marker of the Indian-Nepali community which is often seen as a symbol of Gorkha valor. In the Nepali community, the khukuri is an essential part of wedding ceremonies, religious, and death rituals and many even believe it to be a container of sacred energy. While this weapon is much celebrated as a marker of valor and Nepali pride, the makers of this weapon are often not a part of mainstream discourse, and quite undeservedly so, being Nepali Dalits. Revisiting social customs and items related to the cultural study and the politics of social inclusion and exclusion, this paper attempts to spell out this unique situation of caste within the background of the larger national identity of Nepali pride, valor, and loyalty, symbolized by the khukuri. The paper aims to interrogate and unveil the mainstream Indian-Nepali discourse, especially in the Darjeeling Hills which has continued to turn a blind eye to the Nepali Dalits and overlook their contribution to the cultural heritage of Nepali people to the larger narrative. Hence, it is a study of the culture, history, and society of the Darjeeling Hills to provide a more comprehensive and inductive view of the Nepali Dalits, the makers of khukuri whose lived reality within the larger community is often overlooked and goes unseen.

Keywords

Nepali Dalits; *khukuri*; Darjeeling; Gorkha; social acknowledgment

Recommended Citation

Sinha, M., and Subba, D. (2022). Visible Weapons, Invisible Woes: The Question of Caste in Darjeeling Hills. *HIMALAYA* 41(1): 63-73.



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Introduction

Much has been written about the Nepali community who predominantly live in the Eastern Himalayan belt of the Indian subcontinent (Pradhan 1982; Subba 1992). Yet, most studies have remained focused on the diasporic studies and the fight for identity which has remained an issue of central importance for the entire community. The Indian-Nepali community mostly referred to as the Gorkhas, is predominantly looked up to as a martial race known for their bravery, especially in colonial history. Correspondingly, Subba (1992: 55) elaborates that the Gorkha identity in India was born on the battlefields “in the military history of the Gorkhas;” even if one may not fully agree with the argument, one cannot deny that it was the Gorkha soldiers who made their people famous and infamous: “It was they who decided the future of their fellow herdsmen, agriculturalists, and laborers. Other occupational categories had little role in conceiving the Gorkha identity and delivering it” (ibid: 56). For similar reasons, Indian-Nepalis share a long colonial history with the British Raj as they played a crucial role in the settlement of this community. Formal recruitment of these people into the British Army eventually meant a high concentration of Nepali-speaking population in the Darjeeling Hills, Sikkim, Bhutanese foothills, the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh, Patkoi Hills, and Burma (Subba and Sinha 2016:4). This recruitment was a result of experience on the battlefield beginning in 1814 when the British fought against the expansionist Gurkhas and appreciated their courage and martial skills (ibid: 4). Hence, people belonging to this community have always been hailed as the bravest people known to mankind as reflected by the famous words of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw: “if anyone tells you he is never afraid. He is a liar or is a Gurkha” (IDR 2019). This line captures the level of courage associated with this race at the same time it reveals how bravery has turned into an identity marker for this community.

The one predominant image of the brave Gorkha is the image of the soldier wielding the *khukuri*, a traditional blade that is supposed to strike terror in the hearts of the enemies and is used in field service by Gorkha rifles, Assam rifles, and Garhwal rifles in the Indian army and the Royal Gurkha Rifles in the British army. It is part of the uniform of the army both for ceremonial purposes (*khukuri* dance being one of them) and as a weapon, hence has a symbolic as well

as practical purpose. However, it should be noted that the brave “Gorkha army could not be complete without the Kamis to manufacture the *khukuri* or the Damais to play the band for the army” (Subba 1992: 53).

The legendary *khukuri* is a blade of Nepali origin that has gained international claim for being a symbol of Gorkha valor and loyalty and much has been written about this blade in history and literature. It has even made its appearance in popular literature and culture as well as the weapon of choice to bring about the death of Bram Stoker’s vampire. Likewise, it has captured the imagination of bladesmiths and historians alike.

But, within the Nepali community, this blade has further significance. The usage of this traditional weapon is not limited to the army alone. In the Nepali community, as mentioned earlier, *khukuri* is also used in religious rituals, wedding ceremonies, and even funerals as it is seen as a symbol of protection. It is an integral part of cultural beliefs as some people keep it under their pillow to ward off bad dreams. It is worn as insignia in clothing to signify bravery and loyalty. It is also commonly used in the domestic space for doing everyday chores in Nepali households. So, the significance of the *khukuri* goes beyond the martial space into the space of the common everyday world of Nepali folks as it remains a vital symbol of the entire Nepali community. Hence, this blade has been the center of many critical discussions, essays, and books.

While this weapon is much celebrated as a marker of valor and Nepali pride which is visibly paraded in both public and private spaces, the makers of this weapon are often not a part of mainstream discourse, and quite undeservedly so, being Nepali Dalits. The art of making this world-renowned weapon is inherited by Dalit families - the blade is made by the ‘Kami’ caste while the leather sheath is made by the ‘Sarki’ and ‘Damai’ caste. Any study of caste division reveals that caste was born due to its associated profession which is reinforced in the division of labor when it comes to the making of a *khukuri* as well. The reason why the ‘Kami’ caste has inherited this art of making the blade is that they are the traditional blacksmiths of the Nepali community. These blades are forged by master bladesmiths which involves a lot of skill and hard work. As there are various kinds of *khukuri* made for different purposes recognized by the distinct shape of their blades, the process of forging one involves a lot of

knowledge. Likewise, the wooden handle and its leather sheath have many variants according to the purpose of the blade. These are made by the caste which is traditionally associated with leatherworks. Hence, it is clear that a flair for craftsmanship and talent is required to make this blade as this is a weapon that is rich in history and culture.

Unfortunately, the makers of this same weapon which is a cultural marker of the Nepali community rich in history are unjustly labeled as '*pani na chalne jaat*' which roughly translates into 'the caste with whom it is forbidden to even share water.' This provides a connection that captures the deep-rooted prejudice in the Nepali community and points towards the presence of untouchability, rendering them invisible from the community's collective discourse.

A quick survey of scholarship in this area reveals that there is a lacuna in the study of Nepali Dalits in particular from the hills of Darjeeling. While there have been a number of critical studies which have focused on the differences and commonalities in the social stratification and class/caste structure between citizens of Nepal and the Indian-Nepalis, the question of identity has remained of paramount focus of most critical studies dedicated to Indian-Nepalis. This lack of scholarship is an important marker of marginalization since it reveals a larger lack of agency. Hence, an approach to this study of Nepali Dalits living in the hills of Darjeeling is fraught with impediments since this place has its own unique history and culture. This means that the case of the Nepali Dalits cannot be viewed with the same lens as one would view the overall study of Dalits within the Indian subcontinent. Likewise, the lack of a strong historical and cultural foundation created by critical studies in this area means that a more nuanced approach to this topic is necessary. Even though *khukuri* has a symbolic connection to the Nepali community all around the globe, we wish to confine our discussions regarding caste to the region of Darjeeling Hills as we are more aware of the issues of caste practices here in these Hills than in other regions of Nepali residence. A nuanced approach that could highlight the distinct experience of an Indian-Nepali Dalit - consequently, this paper is drawn from lived experiences of inhabitants of Darjeeling Hills both from the point of view of an insider as well as an outsider of the Dalit community. It is based on personal conversations with the artisans who have been practicing the trade of *khukuri* - making for many generations. It is

also based on visits to their homes and workshops and on conversations with their families.

Darjeeling: A Melting Pot?

In the district of Darjeeling which has the largest population of Indian-Nepalis, the problem of caste is unique as this place is heralded as a cosmopolitan place where most people of all caste, creed, and religions live in harmony under the umbrella term 'Gorkha.' Darjeeling as a place has a rich yet troubled history. It was at different points in history a part of Nepal, Sikkim, and later became a summer resort for the British. This meandered history of the picturesque hill station has resulted in the presence of a unique local society and culture. In connection to this ethnic history of Nepalis in Darjeeling Hills T.B. Subba (1992: 38), points out that Nepalis and the people of Nepali origin are not hundred percent same, which is a common misconception, and it was only towards the beginning of the twentieth century that Nepalis as one ethnic group emerged in Darjeeling. In relation to this claim, it becomes quite evident that groups who now corporately identify themselves as Nepalis today had separate identities until the 1920s. Subba further clarifies that the only groups which identified themselves as Nepalis until then were the Bahuns, Thakuris, Chhetris, Kamis, Sarkis, and the Damais. As a result of which it has created a cultural melting pot in this region that needs to be put in a critical light.

Now irrespective of this history, one fact that remains significant is the impact of the rich colonial history on this region, effects of which can still be felt today. The colonial influence can be seen in the architecture, food habits and class division of this region. The greatest influence of the colonial power was the introduction of tea in this region which changed the face of this region forever. Another important significance was the introduction of Christianity and missionary schools. Soon, Darjeeling became a hub of education modeled after the 'private' schools in Britain. These schools had a further impact on the social structure of the region as they created a new class of Anglophiles who were the consumers as well as the products of the British-style education system. Another aspect that has had an impact on the social structure of this region is the presence of a number of tribes and non-Nepali communities who practice Buddhism and shamanism. On the other hand, Nepal was never subjected to significant outside forces or prolonged influence of colonial

power which clearly reflects that the modifying effect on Hindu society was significantly absent from the social and cultural lives of the Nepali masses, making the caste norms more visible and practicable.

Perhaps the one important issue which remains central to all discourses and narratives of this Darjeeling region is the fight for identity which has manifested as the political demand for separate statehood. Since the Indian-Nepalis share their ethnic origin as well as culture with the country of Nepal, their citizenship in India is often questioned. The Article VII of The Indo-Nepal Friendship treaty signed on 31 July 1950 further ensured that citizens of both nations could move freely between the borders without a visa (Moktan 2004). This has contributed to further confusion about the identity issues of the Indian-Nepalis. In order to negate this, there was a need for this community to join hands to fight for a common cause of a separate state. Hence, it is clear that the question of identity has remained paramount in all narratives of this region which has relegated every other discourse to the background.

Visible Weapon, Invisible Woes: The Problems of Caste in Darjeeling

The issue of caste has never remained in the forefront since the overarching presence of class and the impact of other religions besides Hinduism meant that caste did not take the similar form that it took in the rest of the nation. In fact, the cosmopolitan nature of Darjeeling means that the issue of caste is assumed to not exist at all. This is a commonly held belief that has been echoed in many works dealing with this region. Michael Hutt reflects this view: “Despite the diversity of their ancestors’ origins, post-migration generations attained a higher degree of equality between castes and ethnic groups than that which obtains in Nepal. The Indian-Nepalis are now unified by their use of Nepali as a common tongue, and by the shared experience of living as a minority community in states where they are ever likely to be categorized as foreigners” (2009: 29)

Caste stratification in the hills of Darjeeling remains intricate especially due to the presence of various ethnic tribes. While it owes its foundation to the brahmanical caste structure of Nepal, the caste in Darjeeling Hills has evolved to reflect its multifaceted history on social as well as communal levels. The term ‘Nepali’ itself has different connotations: Kumar Pradhan (1992:

1-2) in his book *Pahilo Pahar* further elucidates refined meanings of the term Nepali where it firstly, is a reference to a lingua franca of a community; secondly, it takes a political meaning and refers to anyone who is a citizen of Nepal irrespective of any language he/she speaks; and lastly, it signifies the cultural identity of those diasporic group of people who reside outside Nepal. It is in relation to this third aspect that we shall make an effort to have a comprehensive understanding of the Nepali society in the hills of Darjeeling.

In addition to this, we can take a look at the caste structure in Nepal to have a comparative understanding of the caste system practiced in Darjeeling hills: “socioculturally and historically, the communities labeled as Nepali consisted of Taxonomically different ethnic, linguistic and racial groups who were incorporated into the Nepali caste system following the Gorkha conquest of 1769” (Chhetri 2017: 79). The new stratified classification of caste was mainly used by the rulers in Nepal to organize people of multiple backgrounds under the power of a single nation. However, this caste system took a rigid turn over the years. In terms of this paper, one historical event in Nepal raises pertinent questions with regard to caste in Darjeeling Hills: “The Nepal civil code of 1854 (Muluki Ain)¹ divided the society into two dominant groups ‘the caste whose water is allowed to remain pure’ and ‘the caste whose water was defiled’” (Thatal 2014: 62). However, the unique condition of a melting pot in Darjeeling remained especially in relation to Nepal “where caste and ethnic differences were backed by state law until the 1950s” (Gellner 2013: 4). Hence, caste was still not considered to be a defining characteristic of the social structure of the Darjeeling Hills.

Darjeeling came to be a cultural contact zone as trade and commerce boomed, attracting varied communities possessing unique cultures and social systems. Following the influence of the social structure of Nepal, caste division in Darjeeling continued to be based on the hierarchy of the traditional occupation. The status of which was divided into high, middle and the low caste. In this stratification, the low caste of Sunar (Goldsmiths), Kami (ironsmiths), Sarki (Cobblers), and Damai/Darji (Tailors/Musicians) continued to be labeled as untouchables. Hence, there is a clear influence of the Nepalese caste system on the Darjeeling Hills. Despite this fact, there are some marked differences, too, in the sense that the rigidity of the caste system is

not felt at the superficial level due to its own regional dynamics as the region affects the extent and rigidity in the application of these rules (Hutton 1963). It cannot be denied that the complex history of migration and colonial rule is a contributing factor in how caste was perceived in this region. Nilamber Chettri in his essay highlights the causes for the dilution of caste as: “the comparatively late migration of upper castes to the hills, and their disassociation from the traditional source of authority like land [and] traditional practices of forging *Miteri* (fictive kinship)” (2017: 79). As mentioned earlier, the presence of tribes also diluted the caste system followed in Darjeeling Hills: “among those who settled in Darjeeling, tribal languages were lost, many converted to Christianity” (Gellner 2013: 4). Further, the presence of Lepchas and Bhutias meant that the caste system needed to evolve to adapt to the multiplicity of ethnicity that gave the hills of Darjeeling its label of cosmopolitanism. Interestingly, one of the effects of the caste tribe syncretism meant that some ethnic groups were given a higher status in the caste structure, and they continued to internalize the caste norms which further marginalized the Nepali Dalits.

Pursuing this matter further, Pyakurel (2011: 73) justly pointed out that, “Caste-based prejudices cannot be removed but are reproduced in a different form until people know one’s caste.” In the case of Darjeeling Hills, the evils of untouchability have transformed into “Civilised untouchability” (ibid: 73) which requires a keen observational skill to understand its subtlety of it. For instance, the approach to satiate the curiosity to know about another’s caste position in society has taken a more indirect ‘civilized’ turn. In most everyday situations when someone wants to know the other’s caste location, they either make suggestions of various caste groups residing in the Hills (except the Dalit caste group) or they ask them if they are from the higher caste group given the racial similarity between the Dalit and the Savarna group, to stand corrected if they are not. All this is done to hide the social awkwardness or rather to hide from the fact that caste stigma still exists by choosing to make it invisible with such practices. This very subtle so-called civilized act deepens one’s understanding of the role of latent stigma in generating shame and social exclusion. Likewise, the choice of words for the sub-castes within the Nepali Dalit communities highlights a further level of insult. For example, one subcaste of Kami ‘*jat*’ is ‘Tirwa’ which in the Nepali language would

refer to their poor economic status due to which they are always ‘paying’ in some form or the other. Likewise, many choose to deny their caste altogether which has created a unique situation in Darjeeling Hills where, the migratory practice of single families, led to a practice of concealing their caste identity. This common practice of concealment is also highlighted by Chhetri: “I came across many instances, where the upper castes, pointing to some families, would claim that though they claim to be Bahuns and Chhetris (higher castes), in reality, they are Kamis or Damias (lower Castes)” (ibid: 79). This is clearly seen in the practice of adopting non-caste-based surnames like ‘Nepali.’ This further highlights how caste is subtly ingrained into the social fabric of the Darjeeling Hills.

In common life, untouchability is followed especially while practicing religious rituals. A Brahmin priest would perform the rituals at a lower caste household but would refuse to drink or eat anything in the same household emphasizing the effect of ‘*pani nachalne jaat*’ which has become normalized. As mentioned earlier, a keen observation made by Fürer-Haimendorf (1957) talks about how the union through marriage between an upper-caste Hindu and an ethnic member of a tribal group was viewed with tolerance in Nepal. The social acceptance of such marriages was fairly high. A similar practice of tolerance and acceptance is carried out in the hills of Darjeeling as well. But, strong opposition is to be expected if inter-caste marriage is held between an upper caste and lower caste and peculiarly even between a tribal member and Dalit group member. What makes this dichotomy interesting is how tribal groups having no birth status in the Hindu caste hierarchy have also almost become the Brahmanical bodies in othering the Dalits from the hills. Moving further regarding the understanding of the consequences related to inter-caste marriages, honor killings are still very much a reality in Nepal whereas in the hills of Darjeeling such violence may not follow suit. In many instances, the married couple is subjected to social boycott by family members, but violent extremes are never a part of the praxis. By way of projection of a harmonious community especially united under the term ‘Gorkha,’ the question of caste has been lost. By denying its existence, the Indian-Nepali community has turned a blind eye to the various issues that are plaguing the Nepali Dalits which has created a lacuna of a distinctive kind in critical studies of caste.

This lacuna is especially felt in the way the *khukuri* has been celebrated as a weapon and symbol of the entire Indian-Nepali community while its makers have never truly been inducted into the mainstream narrative. This lack of acknowledgment itself is a sign of marginalization and points at the presence of inherent othering which goes beyond the superficial acceptance. The existence of *khukuri* in Nepali households carries a number of social, religious, and cultural meanings which contradicts the social status and position of its makers. For Nepalis, *khukuri* at home is believed to bring prosperity, better fortune, and even ward off evil spirits, but the perception regarding the makers is drenched deeply in prejudice. Holmberg's (2007: 131) study on Tamang and blacksmith relations from the Tamang perspective writes that: "Tamang imagines Kami's to be not so polluting but perpetually wanting, begging, and, by implication, inherently evil." Connotations of evil culturally force them to bear the brunt of social prejudice. In other instances, there are strong psychological implications attached to various attitudinal changes that cause humiliation through caste name-calling (a person's caste may also be used as a form of insult) like the saying '*Kami ko beura na dekha*' which roughly translates into 'Don't behave like a Kami,' strongly advocating the caste-related negative stereotypes as mentioned above and othering developed by the oppressors to validate their power. Such an indirect version of the practice of untouchability in reference to caste implants a deep sense of shame and social stigma in the mind of the person who is at the receiving end of it. The disabling effect of caste shaming is as discriminatory as political, economic, and cultural.

Likewise, worshipping *khukuri* on different occasions and festivals like Biswakarma puja and Durga puja is considered a dynamic icon of Hindu mythology. The *khukuri* during the festival of Dashain is worshipped and put into action by beheading domestic animals as offerings to Goddess Durga. Yet, the Kami women are likely to be accused as being '*boksi*' (witches), "of keeping bir or familiars for the appropriation of wealth and vitality from others, or in female form, to capture the shadow-souls of young children." (ibid: 131). It is also evident that many exorcists from the indigenous communities even chant out the evils of '*Sarkini, Damini, Kamini chorera ja*' (female representatives of the Dalit group to leave the body) when curing or protecting children and young male adults.

Women of the Dalit group were also unjustly accused of "how their craving jealousy enters and ruins prosperity. An envious glance at a milking cow, a baby, or a stocked granary can ruin, either sickening or poisoning. Kami women, in particular, are thought to act in this manner" (ibid: 133).

As has been noted, the centrality of untouchability and exclusion revolves around certain stigma attached to a section of people belonging to a particular group which endorses caste-based discrimination, practiced in religious and socio-cultural sites. Erving Goffman, who viewed stigma as a process based on the social construction of identity, acknowledges that the stigmatized and those who stigmatize are interconnected through local social networks and how various facets of social life and relationships are changed by stigma (Kleinman and Clifford 2009). So, the discussion related to untouchability stigma includes a component of structural discrimination or an institutionalized disadvantage placed on stigmatized groups. This allows us to begin to understand how power, social, economic, and political factors influence the distribution of stigma within a social context (Parker and Aggleton 2003).

The Quest for Acknowledgment

It is an acknowledged truth that the world of humans irrespective of any noted time and space have religiously followed hero-worshipping culture, praising and honoring the brave, and the strong. Memories of legendary warriors are kept alive through tales, poems, and ballads to valorize their bravery and conquests, but of what consequence is a brave hero without his/her loyal choice of weapon that defines the identity and location of the bearer? So, as expected the warrior and the weapon of choice are like two sides of the same coin. One cannot exist without the other; without the right choice of weapon, the brave soul will always be a lost cause. Imagine in the Ramayana, how would lord Ram win the battle of Lanka without his bow and arrow? Similarly, would the battle of Kurukshetra be won by the Pandavas and their army without weapons at their disposal?

This brings us to an intersection where the world religiously worships the manifested honor and bravery of the wielder, but never ever bothers to know of the makers of these celebrated weapons. Society renders the creators of these weapons invisible. For instance, thinking of '*Samurai*'² eventually leads us to think of the bold and

timeless katana - a weapon of utmost magnificence. Subsequently, as the word 'Gorkha' is uttered the image of *khukuri* is inseparable from the identity the warrior holds. The visible weapon of Nepali pride, *khukuri* is a symbol of valor in battle, bravery, and honor. It takes up an important place in Nepali culture as it bears the marker of certain qualities like justice, human dignity, and sound character that society holds in high esteem. It has acclaimed fame worldwide as the traditional weapon of brave, Gorkha warriors. But, the very same metal is more than just a weapon of exquisite local craftsmanship to the people who wield it and is also used as a working tool for their everyday life practices. It is an indispensable part of every Nepali household. It is used during wartime to prove bravery and valor to fight for victory, and it is also used for mundane, daily purposes like chopping wood, and cutting meat; for religious purposes where it is placed in the center of the divine space; in marriages; during funerals where they are there to accompany and protect the deceased person from the evils in the afterlife working as a spiritual talisman. It represents the history, traditions, rituals, and spiritual beliefs of the community. It serves as a symbol of wealth, status, and prestige in Nepali culture. It even has a clearly defined social role as an article of dress.

While the cultural symbolism and importance of *khukuri* to the community are very deep, the makers continue to feel excluded and marginalized from the distribution of local economies, social, and cultural entitlements. This was reflected in a conversation with A. Gazmer, a local Dalit craftsman who has been making *khukuri* for the past forty years. At sixty years of age, he is past his prime, but he continues to work in his forge which looks like a makeshift store. One can see his pride as he regales his listeners with how people from various parts of the country have bought his *khukuri* and how he is a maker of the Nepali 'Chinhari' (Symbol). Yet, it is clear from his forge and the price of each *khukuri* that while he may feel pride in his craftsmanship there are very few economic benefits that come with this profession. His lack of any formal education and a proper shop hinted at the fact that he has not been a beneficiary of the years he has spent making these blades.

This contrast was also felt by another local craftsman, Y. Rasaily. His obvious pride in his craft was reflected as he spoke about the different types of blades he had made for different clients including ones from Nepal. He

spoke about how his blades have been gifted to important dignitaries in both India and Nepal. It was interesting to note that even in the social structure his contribution is acknowledged, yet he spoke with pain about an instance when his family members were not allowed to enter the kitchen of an upper-caste member during a funeral. This was an incident that had a deep impact on him, and, while he did raise his voice against this marginalization, he believed that this has become a normal part of our existence. Likewise, he shared his experience of how people have praised him for his work, yet he has faced marginalization from the same group of people when it came to social gatherings like funerals and weddings. As a Hindu by religion, he also mentioned how the local priests, who are typically upper caste, do not eat food prepared in his home, yet use the blade that is forged in his workshop. He also noted that he is the last of his generation who is associated with this art since it is economically not viable to continue making these blades. Hence, he does not want his children to pursue this and would encourage them to shift to other forms of craftsmanship like the making of gold jewelry which he believes will give them a better place in the social and economic structure.

These conversations are a reflection of the problems faced by the section of the Nepali population of Darjeeling Hills who belong to the Dalit community. It is clear that they do not receive any sort of recognition for all their hard work, skill, time, and sweat that goes into making these blades whose shape represents the Hindu trinity;³ they are even alienated from the prestige and honor that their creations bring home. Due to being rendered invisible and marginalized, the Dalit section of the population is debarred from enjoying the shared cultural heritage and freedom personified by *khukuri*. A line of center and periphery is drawn to demarcate the space of living and locating to restricted spaces to limit the instances of contact.

As mentioned earlier, *khukuri* symbolizes human dignity and freedom and is also regularly used as a tool for daily uses, unlike many other weapons of the world which majorly occupy the space of sacred and honor of the wielder or bearer. It then becomes all the more important to discuss the woes of the creators of these magnificent blades for as the maker the Kami produces *khukuri* as a shared cultural commodity for all the members of Nepali society. The labor put into the making of *khukuri* finances the

economic stability of the people involved in the production, but on the other side, one sees a not-so-practical possibility where *khukuri* as the product gets appreciated as an identity marker by the other visible members of the society who proudly showcase *khukuri* as their mascot to represent them and to sing songs of honor that it brings to the community. But, this very honor and prestige are not shared with the creators in the form of social acknowledgment. Having said that, the beginning of the producer's alienation from the product leads to the problem of 'unacknowledged labour,' which allows the makers to be exploited because they are seen as nothing more than tools in the production of the blade. On the other hand, they are othered to a space where they feel excluded from culture and community, forcing them to confine their identity and dignity as humans to one isolated space away from certain locations accessible only to the visible caste. M. Biswakarma, whose ancestors dedicated their lives to making *khukuri* and other metal tools for the other members of the Nepali community, recalls that though her forefathers forged *khukuri* through painstaking labor they never got to own an '*aran*' (manufacturing space). Most of the *aran* in her vicinity were owned by other members of the Nepali community and Kamis would only work there as laborers. Continuing the conversation, she remembers a painful incident of being rebuked while helping in her neighbor's kitchen during a funeral feast preparation in the village by an elderly man of another caste. She somberly recalls the haunting words: "*timi na chua khana jutho huncha*" (you should not touch the food for it will get polluted). This humiliating incident profoundly impacted her, as a result of which from then on she and her other sisters stopped interacting and participating in community activities in the village.

Narratives such as these shed a humanistic light on the quest of Indian-Nepali Dalits to their claim to personhood which eventually enables us to see that they are more than their labels and that relational reality can override societal impositions (Witkin 1998). On the one hand, the marginalized section, who are also the producers of Nepali Gorkha valor and identity, are still waiting to be recognized for their contributions, while on the other hand, they are barred from participating in community life on discriminatory grounds. Even when they do appear in public, the issue is not only one of stigma but also of existence without complete social acceptance. While many of the craftsmen continue to feel

that they have received their due acknowledgment as makers of this symbolic blade, there continues to be this unease surrounding their caste identity. In conversation with P. Ghatani, who is part of a family that has inherited the art of making this craft from the pre-independence era, revealed how he is a proud craftsman. He spoke about how he supplies his work in the neighboring states and countries. He has also received accolades in many exhibitions where his blades continue to win prizes in many categories (taking pride in his craftsmanship, he was placed first in a competition organized by the Takdha Army cantonment). He has been able to sustain his family due to this craft and hence remains grateful. Yet, when the caste questions come, he initially dismisses feeling marginalized, but gradually reveals how he lives in a community dominated by the upper caste. Hence, there is a need to fit in, and so he reveals that he has heard the words '*pani chaldaina*' and how he avoids places where he may face caste-based discrimination. This need to avoid such situations exposes the subtle way in which the issue of caste functions in this geographical location. Thus, one cannot avoid acknowledging the friction between the center and periphery where the visible (touchable) occupy the center and the invisible (untouchables) the periphery, explaining how the structural relationship based on unsaid yet practiced caste lines, has an overpowering impact on the lives and psyches of those being pushed to the periphery. From this vantage point, the pressing priority is in recognizing the value of the cultural heritage of the makers of *khukuri* with acceptance and deserved recognition for their essential contribution to the Nepali society.

Ushering a Fight against Prejudice with Pride

Unlike many parts of India, most Nepali Dalits residing in Darjeeling are economically empowered due to their missionary schooling and background and may not feel the effects of caste prejudices on an everyday basis. The fact that they belong to the rich, upper class ensures that they are not victims of overt marginalization. This also creates a situation where the Indian-Nepali Dalit is unable to connect easily with the atrocities committed against the Dalit communities living beyond the hills of Darjeeling. Moreover, with the stigma attached to being a Dalit, the Indian-Nepali Dalit is reluctant to accept their belonging to the larger Dalit community when it is possible for them to escape this

via the effect of class. Hence, the economic stability empowers the Indian-Nepali Dalit to escape many forms of marginalization that may plague the rest of the economically battered Dalits living in the rest of the country. However, in the Indian context, can one really escape the ostracism of caste?

This paper makes an attempt to elucidate that while we celebrate the *khukuri*, we must also acknowledge that for far too long, the woes of the *khukuri* makers were silently excluded from the narrative. For too long, Kamis have been socially forced to internalize and live with the trauma of cringing awkwardness upon being asked about their caste instead of celebrating their rich cultural heritage and legacy. The stigma attached to identity has been internalized to a great length over time such that the caste group themselves shy away from their cultural identity. Celebrating their rich legacy as builders of Nepali identity comes with an understanding of why there is a need for the Dalit community to seek pride in themselves. Apart from fighting caste-based discrimination and casteism, a number of Dalit organizations, such as the International Forum of Kami, Damai, and Sarkis,⁴ are involving themselves with research on and documentation of Dalit history and legacy. As expressed in the words of Sewa (2019):

Much of our shame stems from our ignorance about our rich heritage, and confining our caste conversation around discrimination only, it's time now for us to know who we are and to take pride in our rich legacy. Yet, instead of feeling proud, we are forced into feeling ashamed of ourselves. (Sewa 2019 as cited in Sharma 2019)

Notably, then, the need of the hour for the Dalit section of the Nepali community is to first, break free from the socially constructed stigma around them and take pride in their caste identities, and then assertively claim the denied dignity for their contributions to the community through their skills. Finally, the stigma around caste affects not only those who are targeted but also those who do not want anything to do with the caste structure but inadvertently become a part of it; they, too, suffer from it as the unlearning process of caste discrimination challenges

them and often paralyzes them to the point of being a silent spectator when caste discrimination occurs. Thus, to eliminate caste prejudice constructive caste dialogues among various caste groups can be a step forward in reframing the shame associated with Dalit caste identity as pride.

Conclusion

We all know of the tales of bravery and magnificence of *khukuri*, but very little of the woes the makers of *khukuri* live with. In connection to this reality, the focus of the paper is to address the issue of stigma faced by the makers of *khukuri* and why community acknowledgment for the contribution they make to the society is justly required instead of justifying their physical separation from the core and shrouding them in social camouflage. As Goffman (1963:138) arguably discusses: “the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives.” It is also an attempt to elucidate the unique situation of caste in a place that celebrates cosmopolitanism and charts the reasons why there is a lacuna when it comes to studies of caste from this region. Such indirect, discriminatory practices also force us to address that various economic and political opportunities gained through various affirmative action seem poorly relevant and unable to overcome the caste prejudice that has been in existence for centuries. To sum it up, the invisibility of another culture and their heritage assets is not the fault of the other culture. Another culture knows its existence and knows its assets. Those who can't see are the ones who have to open their eyes.

Therefore, any study of this community must show how history, culture, politics, geography, and identity merge with one another in this region. Hence, an understanding of the unique milieu of this space is vital to any possible discourse. While lauded with the term ‘bir’ Gorkha, an analysis of everyday life reveals how one cannot escape marginalization, especially in the interior community spaces. In retrospect, this paper attempts to highlight the need for a distinct study of the Indian-Nepali Dalits while placing them in a particular geopolitical space. By drawing on the rich cultural and historical background of a community, it has tried to bridge the existing void in studies from this region while delving into the reasons for this gap.

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We gratefully acknowledge the participation of the craftsmen who generously invited us to their homes and workshops and shared their meaningful experiences. These invaluable contributions not only had a significant impact on this research but also on how we perceive the social and cultural spaces in the Darjeeling hills. We would also like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the guiding spirits who took the time to review, make suggestions, and motivate us.

Endnotes

1. The caste classification of Muluki Ain elaborates the five categories: (1) *pani chalne jaat* (pure caste); (2) *namasinys matwali jaat* (non-enslavable alcohol drinkers); (3) *masinya matwali jaat* (enslavable alcohol drinkers); (4) *pani nachalne choi chitto halna naparne jaat* (impure but touchable); (5) *pani nachalne choi chitto halna parne jaat* (impure and untouchable) (Höfer 2004 [1979]).
2. According to the Cambridge dictionary: Samurai is a member of a military class of high social rank from the 11th to the 19th century in Japan and the Katana (a long single-edged sword) is the marked weapon of the Japanese Samurai.
3. Hindu Trinity: Brahma, the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer who clears away the old to make way for the new.
4. The International Forum - an apolitical body that also has members from politics - is an eclectic mix of the young and experienced, and plans to work keeping in mind the caste-related problems of India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

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