

Photo Essay

A Tale of Two Brothers

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Abstract

This photo essay introduces readers to the two brothers Ramesh and Gopal Baraily. They live isolated, almost invisible lives, separated from their families, confined to the comfort and safety of their small home in the Darjeeling Hills, making ends meet by taking up odd, menial jobs to sustain themselves. This photo essay seeks to capture a day in the ordinary, everyday, mundane life lives of two brothers, marked by their defined physical disabilities and caste identities. Living as outcasts, shunned by family and regarded as a burden on society, these silenced realities begs us to probe deeper into how we imagine ideas of oneness, belonging and home.

Keywords

Kalimpong; brothers; disability; marginalization; belonging

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Introduction

Gopal and Ramesh Baraily are two brothers who live in Sindepong village in Kalimpong, West Bengal. Gopal is a gardener in a nursery, whereas Ramesh, his elder brother, works as a laborer in the locality. Ramesh had been working as a cobbler in the family's local shoe business for many years, but the business had to close down.

The two brothers are physically impaired as Gopal cannot speak, and Ramesh, though skilled in the craft of making shoes, is partly deaf and has speech problems as well. Because of their disabilities, they reside in a hut, excluded from the rest of their family.

I started interacting and photographing Gopal and Ramesh in 2017, when I wanted to capture their stories and way of living. Despite facing many difficulties, the brothers seem to be happy

and content with what they have. The photographs depicted in this essay are part of an ongoing body of work. Every time I visit the two brothers in Sindepong, I learn something new about their lives.

Gopal and Ramesh are 'Baraily,' a caste that is considered of low societal status in Kalimpong. Though the local community does not openly discriminate against others on the basis of caste, the brothers' exclusion from their own family and the rest of society unveils how disabilities intersect with the other multiple layers of marginalization prevalent in India, such as race, caste, and gender.



Photo 1: This is the the view of the forest of the Darjeeling Hills from Ramesh and Gopal's hut. Every morning when the fog slowly clears, the two brothers witness the scenic beauty.



Photo 2: In the early morning, Ramesh takes time to color his white hair to black. He is doing his best to cope with growing older, because he fears the day when he might not be able to do the menial jobs with the same energy as before. Eventually, only one of them will have the ability to work and earn enough of an income to sustain them both.



Photo 3: While waiting for his brother Ramesh to get ready for the day, Gopal is whiling his time away by playing with leaves.



Photo 4: Ramesh with his black moustache and black hair is eager to be photographed. Being isolated from society due to their low caste status and excluded by their family because of their physical inadequacies, Ramesh's countenance hints at the many difficulties he and his brother encounter in their everyday lives.

Photo 5: Although unable to speak, Gopal finds happiness in the small things in life. Here, he is enjoying his portrait being taken in front of his favourite flower in their little garden.





Photo 6: The two brothers begin their day by offering fruits and prayers to their deity, represented by the image inside the wall clock, seeking blessings to help them find another odd job to make a living.



Photo 7: In the other corner of their small hut is Ramesh's old shoe-making machine, with which he once ran a successful small shoe-making business.

Photo 8: Since he had to give up his shoe-making business, Ramesh has become enthusiastic about growing vegetables in their small garden. This newly discovered passion not only helps the two brothers to save some money, but more importantly, offers him a meaningful and rewarding task. Ramesh cherishes the joy, pride and sense of independence when serving his self produced vegetables.



Photo 9: The two brothers have even begun to improve their agricultural techniques to increase their harvest by setting up a water sprinkler to ensure resource-efficient distribution of water.



Photo 10: Taking a break from the hard work in their garden, Ramesh is standing outside their small hut, surrounded by lush greenery. The two brothers dream of adding a kitchen in the future, so they can cook properly.



Photo 11: Gopal on his way to the local shop to purchase some groceries as another day comes to an end. Day by day, the two brothers continue to live their lives on the fringes of society in the Darjeeling Hills.



Photo 12: After a week of hard work in a local nursery as a gardener, Gopal enjoys his day off with a bath and basking in the sun on a warm winter afternoon.



Photo 13: Elections and voting are taken extraordinarily seriously in the Darjeeling Hills. Every vote counts when the people assert their rights - even those of the outcasts of society who otherwise live mostly silent, almost invisible lives. Gopal and Ramesh take their civic responsibility just as serious. Here, they proudly present the marks on their fingers showing that they voted in the last election.



Photo 14: As the two brothers have been living as outcasts on the very margins of society, isolated from their own family, their brotherly relationship has always been of great importance to them, providing the necessary emotional refuge to endure the hardships of their everyday life.

Photo 15: Ramesh warmly hugs Gopal in a display of mutual affection and love. There exists an inseparable bond between the two. Conversation between the brothers is minimal because only a few words are enough for them to understand one another.

I was only a child when I recognized the brothers and their relationship as something special. Today, I am in my early 20s and still see the same, intact bond between them - undiminished, precious, and something they can claim as their own.

