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**INTANGIBLE CAUSES OF POVERTY AMONG ETHNIC
MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN NEPAL
(A STUDY ABOUT CHEPANG COMMUNITY OF
MAKWANPUR DISTRICT)**



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Abstract

Although poverty doesn't limit to a certain caste or ethnic group, this article explores why mostly ethnic and indigenous people suffer poverty. Poverty is mostly concentrated in the Chepang community of Nepal, which according to various studies have to mark them as the most vulnerable and highly risked people to poverty. Around 90% of Chepang are below the poverty line. A study conducted by the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) classified Chepang to be a highly marginalized person in 2004. The focus of my study is to assess intangible factors associated with their cultural values, practices, and norms. The objective of this result is to understand poverty from the perspective of ethnic people and obtain intangible causes of poverty. The data that has been interpreted and analyzed will be secondary through the method of interpretation. The result shows that there are incorporeal causes like their meaningless traditions, customs, rituals, and festivals equally leading Chepang into poverty.

Keywords: poverty, Chepang, ethnic, indigenous, community

Introduction

Poverty is one of the greatest enemies of modern society. Poverty is as old as human civilization. It equally existed in our ancient societies in a more brutal form. The same poverty has deep-rooted its inhuman form in our modern society even more severely declining and affecting every aspect of human society. It has put the entire human race to shame that the people of the 21st century are devoid and deprived of basic living standards and requirements as humans.

Each nation is worried and working to completely eradicate every cause and every nation is outpouring every resource to minimize and control it, but the result is the same, rather it is increasing at an alarming rate. Its dimensions are changing poverty is mostly observed among under-develop and developing countries, and one of the victims of it is Nepal.

Various debates are going on around the world regarding poverty: some claim that it is structural problems causing people to live in poverty; some assume that it is due to a lack of presence of resources for a country to develop. And there is even a group of people who even blames both natural and artificial cause for poverty. The root cause varies from place to place. For some lack of ongoing civil war and conflict may be a cause for other natural disasters and even for others Government Corruption and Instability might be a leading cause of Poverty. For a country like Nepal Geographical challenges is one of them.

Countries have invested huge amounts of money to find the major causes of Poverty. The researcher and scholars have sought the problems and have highlighted the major causes leading to poverty. But the problems are causative factors of poverty that are different in different regions and societies. The solution applied to eradicate

poverty in a particular place may not be applicable in other places. The faces of poverty are different; therefore, a remedial solution to remove will be different. Thus, till now it is always challenging to completely remove it from the face of the earth.

Before, we further discuss and talk about poverty; I think it is significant that we understand the basic meaning and definition of Poverty. Various scholars, institutions, and even individual countries have to define poverty. According to World Vision Canada Area Development Program Data, (2019) in their journal, what is Poverty? It's not simple as you think? Has defined poverty as:

“...that can be extended to include access to health care, education, and even transportation. In government circles, poverty is often further defined as “absolute poverty” and “relative poverty”

Statement of the Problem

The Human Development Reports (2020) Published by UNDP, Nepal ranks 142nd Position among 189 countries in the World. According to this report, Nepal's HDI (Human Development Index) is 0.602; Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in the dollar is 3,457 whereas Norway stands first in the table has 0.957 as HDI value and GNI is 68,494. So, we can estimate from these facts, that the situation of poverty in Nepal is severe. The report shows that Nepal is the fourth poorest country in Asia.

An ethnic group or indigenous nationality, referred to as *Adivasi Janajati* in Nepali, has the characteristics of distinct collective identity; own language, religion, tradition, culture, and civilization; own traditional egalitarian social structure; traditional homeland or geographical area; and written or oral history. Indigenous nationalities are spread out almost in every part of the country.

The Government of Nepal has identified and recognized 59 indigenous nationalities of Nepal through the enactment of the National Foundation for

Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act, 2002. Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) has further classified the 59 indigenous groups into five groups comprising endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged, and advantaged group (NEFDIN, 2003). Chepang community is one of the highly marginalized groups living in the hilly parts of central Nepal.

According to the 2011 census, the indigenous nationalities of Nepal comprise 36% of the total population of 26.5 million. Even though they constitute a significant proportion of the population, throughout the history of Nepal indigenous peoples, have been marginalized in terms of language, culture, and political and economic opportunities. The 2011 census listed the population as belonging to 125 caste and ethnic groups including 63 indigenous peoples, 59 castes (including 15 Dalit castes), and three religious' groups (Muslim, Sikh, and Bangali).

One of the most backward indigenous nationalities of Nepal the Chepang inhabits in the remote districts of the mid-hills of central Nepal. They claim that they belong to the Kirati group of people. They have their distinct language, which belongs to one of the Tibeto-Burman strains. Like the Kusundas, the Chepangs are mostly hunters and gatherers. Their subsistence economy is based on forest resources. They are emerging as horticulturists also. Being landless, 95 percent of them forage tubers for food. Today it is stated that they became landless mostly due to a lack of documentary shreds of evidence to claim land ownership. They also had a system of kpat, communal ownership of land till the first half of the 19th century. They are animists and their clan priests are called Pandes. It is felt that their religion and culture are influenced by the Tamangs. Less than 15 percent of Chepangs are literate and almost 90 percent of them are leading a life in utter poverty (UN RCHC Office, 2012).

The objective of the Study

In this section, the purpose or the objective of the study is mentioned. The title of the research itself highlights the problem of the study, and as the topic suggested the major objectives of the study are:

1. Try to understand poverty from the perspective of ethnic minorities and indigenous people.
2. To explore the incorporeal factors causing these people to suffer poverty.

Research Methodology

Due to COVID-19, it is almost impossible to visit the site and acquire desirable primary data. Some of the data collection tools and techniques like focused group discussion – FGD and participant observation are key tools for gathering information in qualitative research that cannot be executed. Because this needs a physical presence in the study site and face-to-face interaction with the respondents. Therefore, research document analysis and secondary data will be applied as a means of interpretation and results. Not being able to visit the field and acquire primary data and information from the targeted group is the limitation of this study. A qualitative research method will be adopted to carry out this research

Research Document Analysis

Document analysis is an important method in social research. In it previously published documents, literature, and journals on the relevant and related topic will be closely examined and will be analyzed for the results. It is a type of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to provide a meaningful understanding of his/her research topic. In its already published journals; research articles; thesis; dissertations; books and newspapers will be thoroughly analyzed and

taken into consideration. For analyzing a piece of information from these resources a systematic planning procedure has to be followed. First of all, we have to create a list of texts to analyze and explore. Secondly, these obtained documents have to ensure no cultural and linguistic barriers. The researcher further has to develop strategies to ensure credibility and ethical consideration like confidential information has to be taken seriously.

Analysis of Secondary data

There has been various research conducted regarding the socio-economic condition of the Chepang community. Those data have been gathered, interpreted, and draw conclusions from these sources. While analyzing secondary data the relevant, latest, and contextual sources will be explored. A careful and thorough study will be done, and then the appropriate information will be gathered. The collected information will be analyzed and interpreted as per the requirement of the objectives of the research.

Findings and Discussion

Data obtained from the research method has been deeply interpreted and analyzed through the qualitative data analysis process. In this chapter, I have tried to encompass, summarize and interpret the findings into five main points that are listed below.

Alienation from the society

The problem with ethnic minorities is their identity; it is difficult for these groups to diffuse with outsiders. Neither the people living outside of their community accept them nor do they easily digest the people, which are not from their community. There is null or very little interaction between these people outside their community. Despite

being part of a particular society, they are not able to associate and mingle with their own society. They are left behind in everything. Their ideas and skills are not considered important while planning or resolving social problems, it is because of two major reasons: one is this ethnic person doesn't want to be responsive and secondly, non-ethnic people don't show their approachable attitude towards associating with them. So, this happens from both ends out of ignorance and at times knowingly. Not to consider, realize, and include is plenty of misconceptions at times that the ethnic are of no significance.

It is evident from the various studies that the ethnic minorities are poorer is due to the so-called welfare gap, a situation of discrimination in the marketplace, whereby ethnic minorities are paid less for the same type of work. The possibilities of getting economic opportunities are less compare to the other majority class. Besides these there are other different causes leading minorities to poverty is having a larger average household size as a result of having more children, and hence a higher dependency ratio. Ethnic minorities have less access mobility, less access to mobility, less productive land, less access to formal financial services. Ethnic minorities have lower market access and poorer returns from markets. Men and women from some ethnic groups are paid less on average than those from other qualifications, experience, and so on. (Barnard and Turner, 2011). Ethnic minorities are subject to stereotyping and misconceptions, not just among the Chepang community, but even among ethnic minorities themselves, which can hinder participation by ethnic minorities in their development. (Dang, 2012)

There is a low degree of social relationship and integration between ethnic and non-ethnic people. They do not share common values and practices, and this is also one of the fundamental causes of separation between ethnic minorities and indigenous

people. Not being able to cope with changing environment as demanded by modern society leads them to live individually as a community of similar faith and norms. One of the questions that were randomly asked on one of the websites about, “why has ghettoized community become alienated from the rest of the society?” One of the very relevant answers that were provided in this text was, “...as they feel more secure living amongst them. Out of fear and hostility, they have grouped themselves and does not want to mingle with the rest of the society.” This fear of being hostile drives them to alienate from the rest of the group. Therefore, they maintain unity among them, and any outsider has not entertained either insider are allowed to mingle with a foreigner.

When an individual group tries to maintain its own identity excluding from the rest of the world in the global context of universalization, then they are completely devoid of the privileges and benefits that the society outside can offer them. When one is exposed to the outside world then they tend to inherit the knowledge and skills that rests outside of them. On acquaintance, there will be an exchange of trade and sharing of knowledge and experience, which is the long run can be applicable and useful to apply in their locality to survive and equip. When a certain community remains static and immovable excluding from the rest of the world, there will be no import of the resources and foreign knowledge, which are essential in today’s context to advance under neighboring societies. This ultimately impacts them with poverty and will affect them intensely on not being able to become receptive to the ide knowledge.

Lack of action to preserve and promote their Indigenous knowledge; skills and occupation

Badi people who are the ethnic people of west Nepal had their indigenous knowledge to make traditional musical instruments like *madal*, flute, and also essential

domestic utensils. According to Parajuli (2012a), some of the traditional occupational skills of ethnic people and indigenous people are listed as *Aarankokam* (ironwork at hearth); bamboo relate work; coloring and mending skin ware; *katuwali* (Messenger work); leather collection and processing, etc. Most of these traditional occupations and skills are in the phase of declining, due to the lack of protection mechanisms in place. And in most cases, we find that these traditional skills and knowledge have been replacing by modern technology. Parajuli (2012b), in his book called “Knowledge and Practice of Traditional Skill Technology among Hill Dalit of Kaski,” has outlined that traditional knowledge among the hill dalit kaski is in the process of getting extinct. He further adds, “...transfer of traditional occupational skill is very limited among Dalits.” He blames that there is an encroachment of the modern market and “..changing value about traditional occupations are responsible for the reluctance in the transferring and learning TST (Traditional Skills and Technology) related knowledge.” The new generation lacks the interest to transmit these skills and pass them on to another generation. They even lack motivation and at times feel shy to carry on this works. Their patriarchal who survived and spent years conducting this work, the youth of present generation are attracted to outside work or western culture and thinks that what their forefather was doing all these years is outdated in this modern society. Moreover, whoever wants to carry out they do not get respect and regards to this traditional knowledge.

The problem here is that neither they are preserving their ancestral traditional occupation neither are capable of competing outside their community with outsiders. Also, they do not upgrade their skills in the modern world; so that they can prove effective with modern technology and they can better sell their products made out of their traditional knowledge and skills. Though there has been certain improvement

among some of these ethnic minorities that they have slowly started adopting their lifestyle besides their community. They have realized and have started sending their children to school, and are slowly embracing alternative small and cottage industries. These days much INGOs focus are on these people to raise their living standard by alleviating poverty that they have been suffering all these years. But there is a huge gap between their improvement and modern society, it will be almost difficult and impossible to grasp that degree of awareness to prepare owns the ability to walk with the civilized people of the 21st century.

The 'culture of poverty is a commonly contested theory of poverty. Oscar Lewis coined this term in his book entitled 'The Children of Sanchez' in 1961. In his ethnographic studies of small Mexican communities, he uncovered approximately 50 attributes shared within these communities: frequent violence, lack of sense of history, neglect of planning for the future, and many others (Lewis, 1961). Similarly, in the case study of Tuason (2002) among the two Filipina wherein one became rich and the other stayed poor, she uncovered the cultures of poverty that exist: early marriages, bigger family size, not-well-compensated hard work, commitment to a strong family system and are highly indebted to parent with an intense need to give back or 'utangaloob', family centeredness, deprivation of dreams, help from others 'swerte' and reliance on God.

The issue here is about poverty and how that poverty has engulfed these simple and innocent people for ages. Therefore, as long as they do not either adapt to the new settings of modern society or reform their traditional skills, it becomes more and more difficult to vanish the absolute poverty that is encircling them.

Egalitarian Society

The beautiful thing about ethnic people including Chepang is that they believe in the equal right to equal opportunities and claim that an individual that is born in their community bears likeness despite their age, sex, color, and physical deformities. There is an equal distribution of available resources and goods without being biased. In other words, most of ethnic communities are classless, there is rarely a class structure that is perceived and exercised in such community groups because there is no superiority or inferiority in terms of claiming opportunities and bearing duties. According to the norms of the egalitarian society, everyone values generosity and big-heartedness. This concept in itself is righteous, and harmonious and binds the members into a unified communal sense. But being non-discriminatory and impartial there are certain economical limitations, which in the long run led them to poverty.

One of the major problems that are seen in such a community is that there is a lack of a leader to take up the authoritarian role, who can act in the given situation to lead and direct into achieving certain profitable objectives or goals. When there is no layer of labor or class, the workforce is not created, which can take up the huge responsibility to share common economic benefits and interests. And can collectively act to in achieving financial benefits that can ultimately lead to the welfare of the community. The class or workforce group within a community is supposed to mobilize people in the production process, but due to the lack of formulation of class, this doesn't happen and has to depend on subsistence living.

Steckermeier L. C. &Delhey J. (2019) in their article 'Better for Everyone? Egalitarian Culture and Social well-being in Europe explain that to become poor is an individual choice and those who rely on their fate for being poor don't want to lighten the burden of poverty. He further describes, "Content-wise, individual blame bluntly suggests that the poor are poor because they are lazy and will power-power—essentially

a denial of deservingness.” A similar expression is found among the ethnic people who undergo severe poverty. They think that it is due to their destiny and blame for being born in that particular community. They pass on this myth from one generation to another generation revealing that they can’t rise above these physical conditions. And this is one of the reasons that they remain static in insufficiency and scarcity.

Lack of sustainable earning and living

Most of the ethnic minorities including Chepang are transitioning their mode of life from a nomadic to a semi-nomadic lifestyle. Whether it is the nomadic or semi-nomadic mode of life, people largely rely on the nature or environment for their subsistence; nature is their storehouse. In ethnic communities there is nothing such as keeping and storing for the following day or the future, people earn to survive for that day only. There is no greediness among the community members; people take from a nature that is sufficient for them for that day. Everyone shares no less or no more than what is required. There is even no competition among the members of the community to own the resources. While switching from wandering life to a more stable settlement, people gradually learned to stock their seasonal crops during the crisis. But that never is enough for them to trade or sell for the money. There is nothing that grows in abundance because their settlement is either close to the forest, river, or deep forest. They experience severe topography and mostly lack arable land that has no irrigation facilities.

Many of these ethnic people are fishermen, pastoralists, subsistence farmers, and forest-dependent, and this dependency is equally observed in Chepang. They largely rely on forest products for a living, but that is not always enough for them to survive with the growing family population and intervention from the government side that it is prohibited to illegally encroach into the community forest. This has further

added a challenge to the Chepang that they can't be anymore collect food, wood, and grass for livestock now has been stopped which was the ultimate source of their survival. Thus, this is not a sustainable model of survival, because these traditional people lack the basic concept to use natural resources without depleting them for the future generation. For example, they cut down the trees as they like and as per their need without planting another tree instead. So, lack of proper and sustainable living many ethnic people are living in the misery of poverty.

One of the major factors causing Chepang people to poverty is their traditional subsistence based on small economics. They rear a small number of mixed livestock in a house e.g., Cattle, buffaloes, poultry, goat, and pig. They lack luxurious items like a television, refrigerator, computer, telephone, and any type of movable vehicle. Sharma & Aryal (2016) reaffirms that agricultural modernization and livestock promotion is the route to bring reform in the Chepang community. Their economy can be improved by directing small businesses to youth Chepang. Chepang is business-minded, so the expansion of such public infrastructures along with local organizations helps promote community development as a whole.

Futile Traditional practices, rituals, customs, and meaningless festivals

In Nepal, according to the Nepal Living standard survey (NLSS), reports reflect that the pace and extent of poverty reduction especially among ethnic minorities remained uneven for the past few decades. There has been a trend of dramatic poverty reduction among the dominant caste group (some reduced by 45 percent), while poverty reduction among ethnic minorities and indigenous people has been discouragingly slow. These variations are the result of uneven, unjust, and culturally insensitive development programs, as well as a misdistribution of resources. Development programs should be beneficiary-oriented in the practical sense, instead of power-

oriented, and they must be corruption-free. (Subba, Pyakuryal et.al. 2014). Our state policies lack the minorities people should the opportunities to act on their development priorities, formulate and implement development programs for their regions and provide their informed consent before any decision is made about their development in their area.

Many ethnic minorities and indigenous people throughout Nepal practice diverse traditional, and spiritual rituals and customs. Each community has its distinctive practices that are mostly spiritual and traditional based. These practices sometimes resemble and reflect the early and primitive form of Hindu, Buddhism kirati religion. Each community celebrates various festivals according to its distinctive customs and rituals. They occurred in sacred or symbolic form or through a systematic ceremonial process. There are steps and every act is carried out very sacredly and each act carries meaning. Each member has a distinct role and has to strongly abide by the norms and code of the worship service. These rituals occur during birth, Nuwarana (Name-giving ceremony), marriage, funeral, and death, animal sacrifice on different occasions; and special day observance and celebration. These allow them to build and develop unity and focus within a community of their own. Cultural and traditional exchange and diffusion are prohibited to some extent. There is a progression in the traditional practice compared to their ancestral, but their mode of observance of these beliefs remains the same.

Their reverence, worship, and service to these traditions are reflected in their lifestyle through the music they play; dance craft, language, celebrations, food, folklore, and craft. At times though these traditions, customs and practices bring charm in providing identity to the certain ethnic community, but in a few, these traditional and orthodox beliefs push these communities from the mainstream development process.

Such meaningless practices and norms hamper the development of their community. Not only this they prevent individuals or communities from reaching their full potential. Because they are so much stick to these codes. In 2017, there was a survey conducted on Community Perception by UN Country Team (UNCT), recognizes that “harmful practices as a serious barrier to development outcomes, ...These practices hinder inclusive governance and political participation, economic development, education, agricultural development, health and more...”

They hinder bringing transformation in their thought process to abide in the new knowledge and skills that the endowing

Some of these traditional practices are based on superstitious and discriminatory and carry no significance. They consume unnecessary resources and time, which can be otherwise used for some productive outcome. These irrational practices have brainwashed and illusion the mind of these ethnic people and they are not exposed to change to newness and transformation. At times they conflict with the existing law of the land. Early pregnancy, child marriage, incest, and nutritional taboos are some of the common practices among ethnic minorities that are contrary to the country's inland laws.

One of the misconceptions that have largely submerged the people within and outside these communities is that upholding outsiders' skills, knowledge and experience can result in withering the ethnic taste of that particular community. It is greatest of all the delusion to believe that adhering the intercultural knowledge can lead to the extinction of traditional knowledge. For ages, radical and positive practices have widespread diffusing among the various societies of many countries. Progressive practices have been always been accepted and have been recognized.

In reality, these people have been tangled from all side, their dependency on nature is now almost lost and cannot be imagined because the government has now put on the strict restriction. They on their own cannot do anything, because they have no sources nor the traditional skills can ineffective to the modern knowledge. And they are reluctant and incompetent to participate with the outsiders. The help that they have been receiving from different sources also is not sustaining them. The only remedy that I see is to assimilate the good practices; catalyze the existing traditional skills and adapt to the way of living that modern society demands. In telling this I am not suggesting ignoring their cultural values and practices. But I am more concerned that any practices or rituals that carry no meaning should not be upheld. In upholding those intangible causes, they are nurturing poverty. New approaches to find lasting solutions are to approve education, expose to modern knowledge and technology. And learning how that universal knowledge can be useful to modernize their traditional skills so that they can produce and can equip and develop their economical ecosystem that has its identity and can be linked with the outside world.

Conclusion

The issue of poverty is not one community or society or country's problem, it is seen all around the world in different forms. The degree of poverty is different from place to place, country to country, and society to society. It is more intense and popular among ethnic minorities and indigenous people in all countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Similarly in Nepal, poverty is mostly found among ethnic people and some of these groups experience a higher degree of poverty, which in the modern tongue is called absolute poverty. Two factors surround when we talk and discuss the poverty of ethnic people. Firstly, it is due to the belief system that is hindering them to rise above the poverty line. They fear that they will not be accepted or diffused by the

larger community that is waiting outside them. Secondly, they blame their fate, the consequence of being born in that community and they have to learn to adjust to poverty. They can't change it; they call it a *bhagya* (fortune) that they had to live in this state of poverty, and this cycle will carry and continue among many generations, which are yet to come.

In the conclusion, unless the people within the community do not realize that they can rise and can live in an improved society equally as others. No transformation is going to come and we cannot hope for any change. While internalizing, they also need to focus on eradicating unnecessary practices that exist in their community that are not seen but have carried throughout many generations and have no meaning at all. In doing this they are not losing their identity as separate ethnic people, but rather become one of the units in this global village. They need to learn to be more professional as the world demands. They can still retain their own identity as separate ethnic or indigenous people even with adhering to the changes.

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