

At the Doorsteps of Democracy: Nomads and their Political Space in Uttar Pradesh

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The democratic system of political participation in India has strengthened the weaker sections of society. Using the right to vote, they have silently revolted. Wider public discourse and considerable academic writing on the subject is available. Work on the politics of backward castes of India is substantial (Beteille, 1992). While on the one hand, scholars of Dalit consciousness have explained the ways in which Dalit politics prepares its base in written and oral forms (Narayan, 2011) and on the other, little thought has been given to the lives and politics of nomadic communities in the political sphere. There is practically no discussion on how nomadic and de-notified communities are creating their political space, and the manner in which they have tried to change their lives and forge political possibilities. Using a historical perspective, this essay aims to investigate the participation of nomadic communities in Uttar Pradesh in contemporary democratic processes, and their daily negotiations with state. It aims to analyse the ways in which, over the last three decades, socio-political changes have connected these communities to India's wider political structure through the Panchayati Raj institutions.

A People Dishonoured by History

Critical writing on nomadic and de-notified tribes in those areas where there has been unrest in response to oppression, discrimination and exclusion is well known. Mahashweta Devi and Ganesh Narayan Devy are significant figures who have given voice to this unrest. In February 1998, in the Puruliya district of West Bengal, a young man from the nomadic Sabar community, named Boodhan, was beaten up and murdered in police custody on allegations of being a thief. Following this event, protests broke out across the country. A play called *Budhan Bolta Hai* (Boodhan Speaks) was written about the

victim's custodial death and staged in different parts of the country. Being placed on the same level of suffering, pain, disgrace and stigmatization, the peoples of nomadic and de-notified communities across the country considered it a document they could relate to (Devy, 2006; Devy, 2002)

To fully understand this sentiment from the real world of nomadic and de-notified communities, one needs to understand the process of state-formation in pre-modern India and its colonial history, in which a coalition among the powerful classes of society and the state was formulated (Devy 2002).-It is this coalition that has led the police and landlords of the area to consider the nomadic communities as thieves and untrustworthy people. State and society have both colluded in this.

It is an established fact that anthropology in colonial India was essentially a project to procure and manage information about Indian social life. Even senior police officers were appointed as anthropologists. Data, thus, produced became the basis for the marginalization and stigmatization of many communities, especially in the periphery of mainstream society (Dirks 2015) Their dignity was snatched from them and they were ousted from history. Explaining the colonialist basis of this ousting, Meera Radhakrishna has called these communities as 'people dishonored by history' (Radhakrishna 2001).

British colonial rule subjugated different communities of India on different levels. It classified its 'subjects' through different categories. It reproduced information acquired from colonial anthropology as normative knowledge (Singh 2015). In this imagination, peoples residing in forests were represented in census registers, anthropological studies and administrative details as communities devoid of political sense and civilization. Following their own historical experiences of capitalist agriculture and the Industrial Revolution in Britain, where non-farming communities were either forced to go to the cities, derided, or both, the English set up agrarian production as the norm in colonial India, and the non-farming communities of the forests were stigmatized, and

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their traditional attachment to the forests and pastoral lands destroyed (Guha 1999).

While writing the history of modern times, historians have noticed how due to state-sponsored irrigation projects and the making of landed property regimes, pastoral life systems were marginalized (Sarkar 2014). There was a special category of land termed *shamilatdehor* 'community land' in the land system. Animals grazed on it. But the colonial regime forcefully excluded the pastoral and nomadic communities from the rural imagination.

In 1871, the Criminal Tribe Act was passed. This act was implemented in the north-western border provinces, Punjab and Awadh. It gave the police administrative control over nomadic communities. About 200 communities in the country were declared 'criminal communities' under this Act (Devy 2013). These communities had to register themselves at the nearest police station and obtain a license for grazing in specific areas. They could not go out of their designated area without the permission of the police. If they changed their habitation, information had to be supplied and permission requested. If a member of a community was not present for more than a year in his settlement without police permission, he had to suffer three years of harsh prison time (Radhakrishna 2001). Even special reform camps were established for them so that they could be suitably 'corrected':

One effect of this was that when, under pressure, nomadic peoples started settling down, the places where they settled were immediately and directly brought under police scrutiny. It did not take much time for these settlements to get stigmatized in general. In this way, through the aegis of the Act, a 'lower' and despised social space was created. The local landlords were not only required to assist police in the registration of nomadic communities but also asked to keep these registered communities under surveillance (Radhakrishna 2001).

In the social and legal fields, this was a collective tragedy for the nomadic communities. The Criminal Tribe Act was expanded in 1921 and many other communities were taken under its purview. Interestingly, by the time the Census of 1931 concluded, a provision on 'Exterior' or marginalized castes was added. It argued that the marginalized castes of Eastern India were self-dependent and could not be called poor in any way (*Census of India*, 1988). Though they were very much a part of the rural landscape of the country, they did not attain the distinction of a formal, legitimate category and instead came to inhabit a negative position within the normative schema. At this time when they were being thus (de) categorized, their lived experience was otherwise. For example, the *Chidimars* (or Bird-catchers) came to markets of villages or towns happily to sell birds. The *Nats* used to sell charms-amulets and entertained people

(Majumdar 1944). Even though they were itinerant, they were attached to the villages organically.

Post-Colonial Questions of Social Justice

Today the population of nomadic and de-notified communities is estimated to be between six crore (Devy 2006) to 10-12 crore.¹ After 1947, when the Constitution of India was drafted and all peoples were given the right to and equality in casting vote, these communities were given the status of de-notified tribes (1952). Ironically enough, they were freed from one derogatory identity but still remained bound by another. In 1959, the Habitual Offender Act guided the attention of the police towards these de-notified communities, re-creating conditions for their continued marginalization. While many marginalized sections of society have benefitted from affirmative action, the continuance of the colonial taxonomy with regard to social groups has ensured that the de-notified, nomadic tribes do not come in any category which could be provided reservations in government jobs. Both in the colonial period and for a long time afterwards, these communities managed neither to develop a political constituency nor a leadership that could redress the lack of legitimate skills required to participate in the modern system of state entitlements. However, more recently, and for some time now, a different category of nomadic tribes be made and they be given reservation accordingly has been demanded by representatives of nomadic communities, intellectuals and social workers working with them in 2002. They were observing the 50th anniversary of the 1952 law of de-notification of Criminal Tribes. India's former Prime Minister V.P. Singh was present here as well (Gupta 2015). This pressure bore fruit and the state's attention turned towards them, the first exercise being that of mapping the subject anew. According to the report of the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, headed by Balkrishna Renke (constituted in 2003), a huge number of the de-notified tribes were found to be living in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Of these, 38 communities were registered as nomadic and 57 as de-notified.² Later, in April 2014, a delegation of these communities met Narendra Modi when he was campaigning in Allahabad for Lok Sabha elections and submitted a memo demanding reservations.³ When his government came to power, a commission headed by Bhikhuji Idate was constituted to look into this question afresh. Its mandate was to make a list of de-notified and nomadic tribes of every state and to suggest ways for the betterment of their lives.⁴ The report of the commission is now out. After meeting and consultation with the representatives of different nomadic and de-notified tribes of the country, the Commis-

sion has said once again that these are the 'poorest of the poor, most marginalized and most downtrodden communities who are subject to social stigma, atrocity and exclusion'. The commission has recommended a Constitutional amendment so that Scheduled Notified/ De-notified/ Semi-Nomadic Tribes can be added as a third category after Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Act.⁵ In its report it recommends that the government should provide strong legal protections and constitutional safeguards, including the extension of the Protection of Atrocities Act to the Notified/ De-notified/ Semi-Nomadic Tribes by creating a separate Third schedule as 'Scheduled De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes'.⁶ More recently NITI Aayog has backed the idea of setting a permanent commission for these communities on the lines similar Commissions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes.⁷ The Renke Commission had already advocated this in its report but little had come out of it. However, the new political assertiveness of these communities is what I am interested in here. This assertiveness is making political parties to think about them.

Nomadic Communities of Uttar Pradesh

To map these changes I have chosen two districts of Uttar Pradesh. Through purposive sampling, I have taken as my case studies of two *gramsabhas* and three temporary settlements from Gonda District, and one *gramsabha* from Allahabad District. The two *gramsabhas* of Gonda district in focus in my work are those of Sisai and Parsada in Belsar Block. Of the three temporary nomadic settlements of Gonda, two settlements are located in Baisanpura and Khadura villages, and the third is situated in a glade close to the Paraspurlocal market. In Allahabad, I have chosen the Tendui *gramsabha* from the Bahadur Block. Fieldwork for this project was carried out in the period 2014-17 and it reveals that the experience of democracy among these communities has been chequered and not singular or fixed.

The *Nats*, *Chamarmangtas*, *Pattharkats* and *Mahavats* make up a larger portion of the nomadic communities of Uttar Pradesh. One similarity among them is that they trade in buffaloes and work with herbs and roots. The *Chamarmangtas* additionally beg for a living. The *Pattharkats* make and sell grind stones or *sil-lodha* as well as honey extraction from forests. The *Nats* and *Mahavats* have traditionally been good trainers for wrestlers. In recent years, the spread of gym and gun culture, and energy-boosting medicines, have made old-style wrestling and skills in wielding *lathis* (sticks) unattractive, leading to a gradual decline of these nomadic professions

(Narayan 2013). *Mahavats* women clean ears and teeth in rural areas. They also take care of pregnancies of the cattle of the peasant communities. In the past few years, the entry of government veterinary hospitals villages has affected their work too. Rural (and urban) society still holds on to colonial perceptions about de-notified and nomadic tribes being thieves and criminals. If they manage to save some money and wear better clothes, they are looked upon suspiciously. The socio-cultural environment arising out of government record-keeping has solidified this mistrust. In recent decades, beset with a loss of livelihood, these communities in Uttar Pradesh have stopped being mobile and have tried—settling down permanently. Locally powerful castes have been instrumental in this process, and have facilitated, under their control, the settlement of these communities in open and barren lands in the villages. Even in the 1970s, P.C. Joshi had complained that there was no study to show how this was fashioning a new relationship of dominance/subjugation between these classes (Joshi 1975).

It is at this juncture that these communities are entering the world of election-based democracy. Talking on the politicization of communities, Rajani Kothari has argued that the social and numerical base of oppressed communities should increase in such a way that they could register their effectual presence in established or new associations. Without this, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) would not have real representatives and they would stay under the dominance of upper castes and their mafia groups in the villages (Kothari 2005). While the slogan of '*jiski jitni sankhya bhari, uski utni hissedari*' (the larger the numbers, the greater the share) fills the larger communities with enthusiasm, it hinders the progress of smaller socio-political groups like my subjects (Singh 2015). Badri Narayan has shown in his work that number-based politics has given political strength to only a few communities and a large section of society has been left behind (Narayan 2016).

Rajni Kothari had written about caste system in Indian society after Independence that the process of politicization of castes has made economical protections, protector-dependent relation, caste councils, and relationships important in power-based system of caste. Understanding the difference between powerful castes and rising castes, he has shown how these groups tried to assimilate those castes who were kept away from the system of power (Kothari 2005). We can use this insight of Rajni Kothari to understand political actions, local experiences of democracy and dynamics in Uttar Pradesh. We can try to see how this locality gets attached to larger political spaces of the country. For this I have first tried to underline the condition of nomadic and de-notified people in PRI. Thereafter, I have tried to see how within

the local power dynamic and hierarchy of caste, PRI has opened a window to acquire power for communities at the periphery.

I begin with the Sisai *gramsabha*. In my fieldwork, I found that almost all old *Mahavats* emphasize that they used to work as elephant tamer with some king or landlord. Though they were settled in this village for a long time it was only in the 2005 UP Panchayat elections when their voter identity card was made and they were included as valid benefit holder in this small political space. There are total 1312 votes in this *gramsabha* which is made up of different castes settled in different areas. There has been no popular naming of areas of *Mahavats* and they are settled on the 'cartographic margin' of the village. Their settlement is still devoid of basic requirements which state and central governments otherwise provide their 'weaker citizens' like India Marchand pumps, Indira Awas Yojna or toilets. The settlement has a vote of political value. *Mahavats* and other candidates who contest the election for village head or wishing to contest know this. That's why a kind of consolidation is forged amongst *Mahavats* who provide them entry into politics. Politics acknowledges this and then uses for its own benefit the already present and rising loyalties to empower itself and forging consolidation (Kothari 2005).

It is not just the democracy which figures in their desire. They are also adding a new chapter in traditional power relations of the village. Of the Dalits in this *gramsabha* are *Kori, Pasi, Dhobi, Chamar and Nai*. OBCs like *Bhujwa, Lohar, Barai, Badhai, Yadav, Loniya, Gharku* and *Saaim-Muslim* are also included. Upper caste communities have the most of the land. In the last two decades, youngsters of some backward communities and Dalit families who have gone to work in oil and gas pipelines in foreign countries, have earned enough to buy lands in the villages. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has come and education is coming. Compared to last three-four decades fewer families now go to work in farms of upper castes. When *Mahavats* were first settled in public land of the village some big farmers thought that they would get cheap labourers. In 2016, in a *gramsabha* close to Sisai *gramsabha* two buffaloes of a farmer went missing one night. The farmer alleged that the *Mahavats* were behind this. He informed the police. Police arrested two *Mahavats* and they were incarcerated. In that situation a powerful family in Sisai *gramsabha* helped them get bail. When I talked to a *Mahavat* youngster he said that only the right to vote protects them.

This power of vote has protected them and changed the traditional structure of power relations. Here we can turn to another *gramsabha*, Parsada. Population of this *gramsabha* is 4000 and total voters are 2550. People of *Brahmin, Kurmi, Muslim-Nai, Pasi, Maurya, Dhobi, Yadav,*

Loniya, Bhujwa, Mahavat and Pattharkat castes are included in this. *Mahavats* and *Pattharkats* tell us that they were settled in that village since beginning while older people of other castes say that they started settling here sixty or seventy years ago. In this *gramsabha* a *Patharkat* by the name of Harishchandra won the Panchayatiraj election in 2015. The important thing was that while the number of this community is around 125 in the *gramsabha* they got 529 votes. This shows that other communities voted for the winning candidate in this *gramsabha*. In Uttar Pradesh, *Pattharkat* community earns its livelihood by cutting stones and making household items. Other than that another means of their income is to collect and sell honey. They hunt fox and rabbit as well. That apart, they have also started working in local brick chimneys to carry bricks. They are owners of small but permanent properties by the roadside. They are not unwanted in the village anymore and have the popularity to win elections. To get access into this arena of democracy they have had to forge a place in the public consciousness of the village communities.

Muslim Nats in Allahabad

Muslim *Nats* are found in the districts of Varanasi, Allahabad, Barabanki and Jaunpur. This community is divided in six sub-communities. Their names are: *Aman, Goleri, Mahavat, Rari, Siyarmarauva* and *Turkta*. *Goleris* make monkeys and bears dance. *Amans* beg. *Raris* are magicians and *Siyarmarauvas* hunt and eat jackal. *Mahavats* used to control elephants (Singh 2005). While in Sisai and Parsadavillages powerful castes are consecutively Thakur and Brahmin, in the *gramsabha* of Allahabad, Tendui, progress-belt Bahadurpur Patels are in powerful position. There are 2950 votes in this *gramsabha*. Most votes, 500, are that of *Kurmis*. After that Muslim *Nats* have 400 votes, *Yadavas* 200, Muslims 250, *Gadariya* 250, Bind 100 and Kumhar community has around 175 votes. *Chamar, Pasi, Khatik* and *Dhobi*, included in Scheduled Caste, have consecutively 850, 100, 80 and 50 votes. There are some people of other castes as well.

The *Nat* community has settled in Bahadurpur *gramsabha* permanently since 1900. When consolidation happened in 1968 in this *gramsabha*, some more lands came to it. Work has been done to see what changes have occurred in villages and farming communities of India. Some sociologists have tried to redefine their field⁸. Still, no work has been done on the topic to see how consolidation in UP has re configured rural power relations and given rise to new changes. In the matter of redistribution of *gramsabha* lands that have come through consolidation enough power has come in the hands of *grampradhan*. Using it they can make their supporters in the

village and change the rural power structure determined by land. *Mukhiya* in Bahadurpur gave some lands to this community so they could work in his farms. PRI has changed permanent power dynamics in this *gramsabha* as well. Despite the hegemony of *Patels* their voice for other communities has softened because they want votes of Muslim *Nats* in elections. On the other hand, Muslim *Nat* community wishes to elect their representative as well. A person of Muslim *Nat* community had lost *grampradhan* elections in 2005. A person of this community had said somewhat angrily to me that if his people won *grampradhan* elections then they will definitely get lease on some empty lands of the *gramsabha*.

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Nomadic and de-notified communities in modern UP are finding their place in the grounds of democracy. They are winning local elections, losing it or affecting it while at other places their position isn't strong. We return back to Gonda district. I have focused on even those groups in this district who are still on the move and in wait of a permanent settlement. In reality, many nomadic communities move about the villages of UP like fish in water. People who have reached in mainstream do not pay heed to their numbers, presence, language, dialect and tone (Singh 2015). They keep migrating from one place to another and stop when they find any open place or banyan or holy fig tree. Their concern remains to get the support of at least one powerful person of the village. This person provides them work either at farms or other places in lieu of money, grain, husk for cattle or other important things such as cane etc. for hut. Nomadic people make contact with others slowly after settling in the village. Those communities that rear buffaloes prove to be useful to farmers, for August to November is the pregnancy period of the buffaloes. In return they take money or grains. They keep such buffaloes that do not get pregnant with them in exchange of some amount or through other oral contract. They return the buffalo to its master once it gets pregnant. This process goes on for weeks and a kind of trust is established with the farmers.

Even amongst themselves, nomadic communities maintain movements and try to empower themselves. The family settled in Bardhai market close to Paraspur in Gonda district is attached to Khadaura *gramsabha* some 14 kms away. Sannam lives with his wife, children and son-in-law in Bardhai market. His sister Sunita lives with him too. Sunita is married to Mangesh. Mangesh is a dancer in a *nautanki* group. Sunita said that she had come to her sister-in-law in Paraspur after which she would travel to Khadaura. The *Grampradhan* of that place has promised to make her voter card. Her brother-in-

law, Gopal, a member of a *nautanki* group was already in Khadaura. This *nautanki* group is run by Nanku of Khadaura *gramsabha*. Nanku belongs to Lodh caste and has a powerful hand in the politics of village. He gives work to the family of Gopal and Mangesh in his *nautanki* company and in return, this family will cast their vote as directed by Nanku. This way a relation exists controlled by political power in this temporary settlement. Sunita hasn't cast her vote yet. She hopes that when her voter card would be made, her problems would be solved, that is, she will get all those benefits government had given to poor people. This way the politics of promise is also inspiring nomadic people to settle. For this settling it is important that they connect with people and get involved in their lives.

This way people of nomadic communities especially *Nats*, *Pattharkats*, *Mahavats* and *Chamarmangtas* search for a chance in rural space to settle. In this direction PRI has brought a bigger chance for nomadic communities. After getting included in voter list of a village the right to vote in Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha comes on its own and they get connected with political soul of the nation. Actually through kinship nomadic communities forge a cultural alliance. Kins not only help one another but they also act as guarantor of their character and behaviour. I have found that when it is asked of them that how long they have been living there they say that they have been living there for long and in the close by village or town stays their kin whom the *pradhan* or important people of that village know. By saying so they wish to cast off the fear inside them which has been discussed in the last section of this article and which English rule and its successor Indian state had instilled in them.

Just 6 kms off Paraspur in an open *bagh* of Baisanpura village, a group of around 50 people live. All of these are from *Chamarmangta* community. Their number here is stronger that is why they appear emotionally strong compared to other nomadic families of Paraspur but their physical condition is the same. In the name of property they have buffaloes, dogs and poultry. Along with begging and labour these people dance in weddings. They wish to settle somewhere around the village permanently and even asked me for help and guidance in the matter. An old woman of this settlement observed that whoever had a piece of land tried to encroach a bit more. But those who did not have any land could not do so and had to be constantly on the move. Though a lot of nomadic communities are illiterate they do know the power of letters.

In post-colonial countries, a report has an important place. Report is the soul of governance. Every person's data is in government's records. Weaker sections feel that by coming into records they will get the benefits

which government provides its citizen. A woman of Chamarmangta community close to Paraspur market had said to me that I recorded her words carefully on paper—*ee kagadva sarkar tak pahuchay detyo tav bahut miharbani hot. Hamhu ke ghar duar mil jaat. Kagad sarkar ke ghare tak pahuchay dihyo.* (I would be grateful of you if you could send this paper to the government. I could also get a house. Please send this paper to government). People standing on the periphery of democracy still hope that government will hear their voice one day.

Notes

1. The Renke Commission report of 2008 had arrived at a rough estimate of their population being between 10-12 crore. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/niti-aayog-nod-to-panel-for-denotified-semi-nomadic-nomadic-tribes-5270427/> 05/08/2018
2. [http://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/NCDNT2008-v1%20\(1\).pdf](http://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/NCDNT2008-v1%20(1).pdf) 25/ 05/2016 .
3. *Dainik Hindustan*, 5 May 2014, Allahabad.
4. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=114573> 02.07.16.
5. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/denotified-nomadic-tribes-may-come-under-sc-st-act-dalit-5157803/> 03/06/2018.
6. Notified/ Denotified/ Semi-Nomadic Tribes
7. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/niti-aayog-nod-to-panel-for-denotified-semi-nomadic-nomadic-tribes-5270427/> 05/08/2018
8. <http://www.epw.in/review-rural-affairs> 06/ 07/2016 .

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