

Caste and Hegemony in Ancient Kumaon

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ABSTRACT

Caste in Kumaon, (present Uttarakhand) was not exactly as it is in the plain areas of India. Four fold Varna system which is widely present in the subcontinent is absent in the Hill regions. But so called upper castes enjoyed their privileges and hegemony various areas of social life. The distinction in Kumaon is not only between upper and lower orders but also between the indigenous and later immigrants. The social status between Khasa Rajputs and immigrant Rajputs is a case in point. First and foremost the, the authority and power was held in ownership of both arable and forest lands. Land was held mostly by both castes and they got it cultivated with the help of Doms. But Doms were not allowed to own a piece of land, although they performed all agricultural operations. Secondly, in administration, only upper castes monopolized all positions in the court of kings. Both castes competed with each other for getting plum posts in the court of kings. If one sub-caste had gone close to the king, that social group monopolized all positions in the administration, judiciary and even at village assembly level. Thirdly in religious and cultural spheres, hegemony continued in the form of authority to wear Janeo (sacred thread). Khasas and Doms were not allowed to wear sacred thread. Even in wearing clothes and food, restrictions were imposed on Doms. This paper talks about social status of different castes and power and authority that went along with the caste. Using historical method, this paper explores the ways and means through which caste dominance was maintained and sustained over the time.

Key Words : Khasa, Thuljat, Immigrants, Doms, Service castes, Bhotiyas, Ritual superiority

INTRODUCTION

Social make up of the society during Ancient period :

The society in Kumaon is different from the rest of India. It was not fourfold division of the society as was generally thought. The society was constituted of three major groups: the Thuljats, the Khasas and the Doms. Thuljat and Khasas together constituted the Both and Doms lower. Doms were the service castes: ironsmith, copper smith, carpenter, drummer, tailor etc. They also worked as *hali* and agriculture labourers. The Khasas or Khasiyas, who constituted the largest number, were agriculturists and cultivated land both as proprietors and as tenants. They were originally not part of the caste order, but centuries of contact with the Thuljat had its impact. Brahmins and Rajputs emerged amongst Khasiyas, although they managed to retain the distinctiveness of their customs and traditions. The Thuljats, later immigrants from the plains, were composed of Brahmins and Rajputs. Apart from claiming ritual superiority they monopolized political and economic

power in the ancient period.

Evolution and Development of three layer social structure :

The three tiered social structure evolved through a historical process. It was argued that the Doms were the earliest settlers in the region. Later the Doms were subdued by the Khasas, a powerful tribe, who set up their rule. Finally the Khasas were conquered by the Rajput immigrants from the plains who set up the Chand dynasty in Kumaun and the Panwar dynasty in Garhwal some time between tenth and Fourteenth centuries. These dynasties continued to rule till the Gurkhas defeated them. The region finally came under the British in 1814. However, the Tehri Kingdom, created after the division of Garhwal by the British, was ruled by the Panwar dynasty till 1949. During the rule of these dynasties a large number of Brahmins and Rajputs immigrated to these regions. Thus conquests and immigration flows played an important role in the evolution of the social structure of the region.

The Thuljats considered themselves ritually superior to the Khasas and the Doms. This was expressed in their strict observation of religious practices and Atkinson argues that Doms are descendants of the Kol tribe and were the earliest settlers in the region. William Crooke argues that they are descendents of the Dasyus of the Veda' and were conquered by the Khasas and the Nagas. Others also agree that the doms were the earliest settlers and later subdued by the Khasas. Scholars differ on the exact date of the foundation of these dynasties but most accept that it was between the tenth and 14th centuries. Thuljats have maintained their genealogies and know the name of their first immigrant ancestor. They have retained their gotra although have adopted new sub-castes taken from the village they first settled or from the office they held under the Raja.

Hegemony through ritual superiority :

The Thuljats sought to conform to the practice of orthodox Brahmanism while the practices of Khasas and the Doms could not be accommodated within the structure of orthodox Brahmanism. The Thuljats put on *Janeo* (sacred thread) which distinguished them from Khasas. The Thuljats took dowry while brideprice was the norm amongst the Khasas. Levirate was prevalent among the Khasas. The social superiority of Thuljats, and the ritual practices that sustained it, was maintained through politico-legal sanctions. Marriage of high caste women with the lower caste men was an offence. The Khasas and the Doms could be punished for wearing *Janeo*. Violation of caste rules was punished by dharmadhikari, an important official in the court of the Raja. 8 Traill writes that there was capital punishment for infringing caste rules by the Doms. Caste superiority was thus maintained through political dominance.

Dominance in Administration :

The Thuljats monopolised administration under the Raja. All important offices like that of the Diwan, the Vazir, the Dharmadhikari, the Daftari, the Bhandari etc. were held by either Brahmins or Rajputs. The Kingdom was divided into circles which were under *Faujders*. *Faujders* were commanders and thus both civil and military administrators. There were *Thokdars* and *Sayanas* under them who worked as their agents. There were other subordinate officials as well. At the village level there was a *padhan* who represented the *Sayanas*. All these offices were held by the Thuljats. All officials, high and low, got *Jagirs*. All of them were landlords with superior rights in land.

Faujders were also in charge of civil and petty criminal justice. In the interior, justice was

administered in civil and petty criminal cases by Faujdars or governors. while the cases of magnitude, and those originating in the capital or neighbourhood were determined in the Raja's court under the superintendence of the Diwan. At the village level there were *panchayats* which were dominated by the Thuljat proprietors. Judicial administration was controlled by the Thuljats and was geared to maintain their status superiority. The Thuljats extended their control over land by getting grants. All officials of the Raja got grants, in lieu of their salary; non-officials could get grants for bravery or for erudition. The religious establishments were also given grants.

Land Grants and Dominance :

Before immigration of Thuljats, Khasas controlled the land and cultivated it with the help of Doms. The land grants to Thuljats changed agrarian relations. The grantee was known as *thatwan*. The cultivators were his tenants. The grantee had a right to *haq-dastur*, the right to customary dues and revenue from tenants. The grantee also had a right to bring one third of the land he was granted under his own cultivation, to be cultivated by himself or tenants. The grantee could not have ejected tenants but if they fled he could assume total ownership of the land and its produce. He could settle new tenants on this land for cultivation but such tenants were called non permanent tenants or *kaini* or *khurni*. Thus the system of land grants strengthened the dominance of the Thuljat.

Exploitation of Doms :

Thuljats exploited Doms in all spheres of life. There were separate well for both bith and dom castes. Only flowing water was allowed for Doms. Bith castes did not allow Doms to enter their houses, although they were allowed to do so for repairing the houses, bring firewood or corn etc. Gautam Dharm Sutra tells that Shudras should wear worn out clothes and used shoes, mats and umbrellas. They should not wear a Dhoti hanging below ones knees. In the same way there were restrictions on food and drink on Doms. In the same way, Doms were not allowed to cremate their dead in common crematorium but had to do it in a separate cremation ground.

Conclusion :

Thus, Thuljats monopolized political and economic power and claimed ritual superiority. They were not only divided into Brahmins and Rajputs, but were further divided into various groups or parties who competed among themselves for power. The power of a particular group depended on its influence at the court of the Raja. The most influential group in the court secured high offices and large grants. The grants of the opposition groups were resumed and redistributed. The struggle for power among Thuljats led to a shift in dominance from time to time from one group of sub-caste to another. However, all of them together guarded their interest against the Khasas and the Doms.

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