

Caste and Occupational Mobility: The Case of Karmakar in A North Bengal Village

Hasibul Rahaman

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Haldia Government College,
Debhog, Purba Medinipur

ABSTRACT

North Bengal comprises of six districts, namely Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda. The Karmakars live at Nityananadapur village of Malda district. They are migrated from East Bengal i.e., Bangladesh. The Karmakars are numerically dominant of the said village. They are mainly blacksmiths, but most of them have changed their traditional occupation. They have also changed their social life along with occupational change. The present study is going to show the reasons behind their occupational change based on primary as well as secondary data.

Introduction

The most unique feature of Indian society is the prevalence of the Hindu caste system based, mainly on some ritual dogmas and beliefs. The whole of Hindu society is divided into a number of distinct strata's known as castes or jatis. Each caste is endogamous and traditionally follows a particular occupation ascribed to it. Their social possession is set on the vertically arranged social hierarchy, which is generally believed to be static in nature. Caste is a localized group having association with particular occupation and commensality is another important characteristic feature of caste system.

By social mobility is meant any transition from one social position to another. In other words, along the line of hierarchy whether one moves up or falls down signifies change of social of position i.e., social mobility. It has various dimensions and occupational mobility is one of these.

Occupational mobility means change in occupation. While the general impression has been that caste is a 'closed' system of stratification's, yet in reality it is far from true. No society is static and even in the traditional set up where ascription was the prime determinant of one's ritual and occupational standing, access to rewards and resources and social mobility both upward and downward was not totally absent.

Objectives of the Present Study:

The basic object of the present study is to examine the nature and extent of occupational mobility among the Karmakars in a village of Malda district.

Source of Data:

The present paper is primarily based on filed work, conducted at Nityanandapur village of Malda district from 9 – 26th September, 2000. For the collection of data different sociological tools and techniques had been used.

II

The Study Area:

The study is conducted at Nityanandpur village, which situated in Malda district of West Bengal. The village is almost 7 to 8 km. Far from Malda town.

It is very difficult to go too far into the history of the said village. Historical data in this regard are rather scarce. The history of the village of Nityanandapur is erected with oral history. As per field view is concerned, we can tentatively say that in earlier days the king namely *Husmain Shah* gone to *Madhaipur Darwar* through this route with dance. This suggests that so called place is known as '*Nityanandapur*'.

Before 1965 the village was inhabited mostly by the Muslims. During 1965-1968 mainly the *Karmakars*, *Mahishya* and other communities such as *Chai*, *Napit*, *Barui* etc. came here from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) basically through the exchange of landed properties with the Muslims of the village. They are migrated

from different parts of Bangladesh like *Rajsahi, Shivganj Kansat, Solpur, Rangpur, Dinajpur* etc.

III

Caste and Occupation in the Village :

Caste system in India is related to the occupational pattern of different castes. A caste or a group of allied castes generally consider some of their callings as their hereditary occupations and there is a common notion that these occupations are sanctioned by the Hindu scriptures and to give up one in pursuit of another is considered not proper.

Industrialization and urbanization have certainly exerted some influence on the caste system and also on caste bound occupation. Sirinivas, (1962 : 86) pointed out that in urban areas, they (Brahmin) were the first to sense the advantages of western education, and the some of those who left the villages become the first teacher, officials, lawyers, doctors, and judges.

The Village Situation:

Almost all the castes are individually ascribed with some occupations. Previously peoples were involved in those occupations but during the course of time certain changes have taken place in the traditional association between caste and occupation. In Nityanandapur there are different castes like *Karmkar, Mahishya, Napit* and *others* (Chai, Kaibarta, Barui, Gosh, Kayastha and Teli) etc. Now the different caste people have taken various occupation like *agricultural labour, wage labour, petty business, cultivation, artisan, construction profession and service and bidi binding* etc.

The caste of Nityanandapur with their traditional and present occupations is discussed below:

Karmakar:

The Kamar or Karmakars of Bengal are popularly believed to be descended from an intrigue between a woman of the Sudra Caste and the celestial artificer

viswakarma. In the Midnapur district they have a legend curiously like the myth of the destruction of the Asuras quoted in the article on the Munda tribe. Once upon a time, they say, there was a demon called Lohasura (Lohat asura), who obtain by his austerities the gift of immortality and warred successfully with the gods. There are eight classes of Karmakar known in Midnapur viz –

- (i) Lohar-Karmakar, who work in Iron;
- (ii) Pitule-Karmakar, who brass utensils;
- (iii) Kansaris, who work in bell-metal
- (iv) Sorna-Karmakar, working goldsmiths
- (v) Ghatra Karmakar, who imitation fruits, iron figures of owls and other birds used in the worship of Lakshimi, and Kajlautis or iron snuffer-shaped vessels for collecting lampblack;
- (vi) Chand-Karmakar, whose speciality is the manufactures of brass mirrors;
- (vii) Dhokras and
- (viii) Tamras, two lower classes of Karmakars found in the gungle Mahals in the west of the district, who eat fowls, are reckooed unclean, and are served by a degraded class of Brahmin (Risley, 1981 : 388)

Table – 2

The following statement shows the number and distribution of Karmakar in 1872 and 1881.

District	Year 1872	Year 1881
Bardwan	32,851	20,399
Bankura	22,750	32,328
Midnapur	32,340	38,474
Birbhum	10,365	9,709
Hugli	11,949	11,318
24 Parganas	21,439	12,890
Nadiya	16,005	15,515
Murshedabad	7,450	8,952
Dinajpur	3659	5,624
Darjeeling	456	319
Jalpaiguri	511	1,619
Cooch Behar	-	619
Malda	4,312	5,895

Source: Risley, 1981 : 392

The Kamakars is numerically dominant caste in Nityanandapur village of Malda district. Out of 221 household the number of Karmakar household is 74. There are two types of Karmakars in Nityanandapur. One is *Jati Karmakar* consider them as superior in social status and other is the *Nunia Karmakar* who belong to lower category. The traditional caste base occupation of Karmakars was backsmithy who used to prepare iron made articles. Some were goldsmith (here did not get any goldsmith worker). Basically, they are making those type of articles which local term is *Kodal* (Spade), *Kurul* (Axe), *Kanchi* (Scissors) of size 8 inch, *Khurpa* (Dibble) of size 8 inch, *Fal* (Plough share) of size 1/1½ fit, *Baisla* (Hammer) of size 1½ fit so on and so fourth).

The *Nunia Karmakar* was involved in salt business. Some are also carpenters. Out of 31 Karmakar households I have studied purposively. Only seven families are still engage to their traditional caste base occupation. Rest of the families (24) has already left their past occupation. They are now engaged in other occupations and work as agriculture labour, wage labour and some of them do cultivation, Petty business and construction etc.

Mahishya

Mahishya Das is the second largest community of the village. There 58 Mahishyas households. The earlier occupation of Mahishyas was cultivation. But only 5 families are presently associated to their traditional occupation. Now the Mahishyas work as artisan and engaged in petty business, profession and service, and bidi binding etc. Majority of the Mahishyas are involved in petty business.

Napit

There are 23 Napit families have in the village. Numerically the Napit occupies the third position in the village Nityanandapur. Their past and present occupation is hair cutting. So, not any change has taken place in the traditional occupation of the Napits.

Kaibarta

Kaibarta Das, a large fishing and Cultivating Caste of Bengal. No serious attempt can be made to trace the origin of the Kaibarta. In Malda district, the number of Kaibarta in 1872 and 1881 are 27,566. (Risley, 1981: 375-382, Vol. I). In Nityanandapur villate the Kaibartas have been included in the category of their castes. We got five household of Kaibartas. They were traditional fisherman by caste occupation. At present they are exclusively involved in cultivation and few have small shops. Due to this occupational shifting they are gradually merging with their middle castes.

Kayastha

Kayastha, caste of Bengal proper, a numerous and influential body, whose traditional origin has the subject of much controversy. No mention of the caste occurs in Manu and the Kayasthas themselves reject the theory which gives them for an ancestor the Karan, the son of a Vaisya father by a Sudra mother. The earliest reference to the Kayasthas as a district caste occurs in Yojnavalkya, who describe them as writers and village accountants, very exacting in their demands from the cultivators. In the Podma and Bhabishya Puranas the Kayasthas are made out to be the children of Chitrugupta, the supreme recorder of men's virtues and vices who sprong from the body (Kaya) of Brahma and this was the first Kayastha. The Bengal Kayastha are divided into four sub-castes uttar first Kayastha. The Bengal Kayastha are divided into four sub-castes Uttar Rahi, Dakhin Rahi, Borendra and Bangaja etc. In Malda district the number of Kayastha in 1872 and 1881 are 5940 and 7820. (Risely, 1981 : 438-443, Vol. I)

Only three families are there. So they are grouped in the categories of other castes. The caste calling of Kayastha is scribing. But at present they work in various sectors, like-agriculture labour, wage labour, cultivation and petty business.

Teli:

There are four Teli households in the village. Telis were traditionally involved in oil processing. But now a days Telis have changed their occupation. They are engaged in cultivation and petty business in Nityananda village.

Categories of Occupation:

Occupational mobility is essential to categories different occupation on the basis of prestige of occupations across which movement of the individuals could be studies. In case of India we find various occupational categories. D'Souza (1962) who has studied occupational grading in India has recommended use of seven occupational Categories. Punde (1986) in her study of occupational mobility among migrants has used nine occupational prestige categories. Philips (1990) in his study of occupational mobility in Indore has used four such categories. (Krishna, R. and Pattnaik, B.K., 1997: 213).

On the basis of above classification and using my own judgment and villagers opinion in has created three categories of occupations which may suit to the local situation. These categories are prestigious, skilled and unskilled occupation.

The Prestigious Occupation :

It includes profession and serviceman like teacher, factory manager and also Panchayat leaders etc.

The Skilled Occupation :

All artisan groups such as Karmakar (iron-maker) carpenter, meason etc. belongs to this category.

The Unskilled Occupation :

All unskilled workers like wage labour agricultural labour are fall into this category.

IV

NATURE OF OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY AMONG THE KARMAKARS

Occupational mobility determines closeness or openness of a system of stratification. And the relative openness of a system is indicative of the mobility permissiveness of a social structure. Occupational mobility may occur due to opening of the stratification system. It may also occur due to the differential expansion of the economy as a whole.

Occupation mobility is either horizontal or vertical depending upon the direction of the movements. Horizontal mobility occurs when individuals move from one occupation or status to another which is similar in terms of prestige, power and income. Occupational mobility is called intergenerational when father's occupational status is taken as the point of reference and it is called intra-generational when subject's occupation in the past is taken as the point of reference in order to measure mobility.

Caste-based traditional Occupation:

In the field it is examined on the central question of the occupational mobility among the Karmakars, what was their traditional caste occupation and what they are doing now.

From in-depth study it came to know that only seven Karmakars are still following their traditional callings. These reasons to remain attended to traditional calling as they stated are as follows:

- (i) To remember and also respect their fore fathers occupation.
- (ii) There was a pressure from the father to learn blacksmith and helping father in his workshop. In this process they become blacksmith and do not want to change their caste based occupation.
- (iii) This occupation helps staying at own house and remain engage in work and use the time according to their will in work. As a result they can also help their family members in need.
- (iv) For this occupation there is no need a bunch of capital.

- (v) Another reason is that they can follow this occupation without education and with considerable freedom.
- (vi) They think that such a work helps keeping them disease free.
- (vii) This work as a household industry is suited for all the seasons.

Due to above stated reasons 22.56% of the Karmakars are still following their caste based occupation, where as the other Karmakars of Nityanandapur village had accept other occupations.

Change in Occupation :

Among 31 Karmakar respondents 24th are engaged into other occupations : Carpenter (6), mason (5), wage labour (6) Agriculture labour (1), Cultivation (1), electrician (1), bidi binding (1), milkman (1), tailor (1) and rickshaw puller (1) etc. They have changed their caste occupation due to following factors.

Immigration:

The present study intends to focus only one community namely Karmakars inhabited by other communities within a multi ethnic village. The village is situated one of the border district of West Bengal and adjacent to Rajsahi district of Bangladesh, Nityanandapur attracts a huge numbe immigrants. Whole villagers are migrated from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) of different places such as – Rajsahi, Shivganj, Sholpur, Dhobra, Pubna, Dinajpur, Lalmonnat etc. After their immigration into this area similar opportunities to follow their old occupation were not available here which had in Bangladesh. A large number of immigrant Karmakars come here with little bit money, which also expended to purchase of land. This is why they have no money to purchase the instruments for blacksmithy work. So, they were compalled to change their previous occupation according to situation as emerged. Here migration was a vital factor to bring changes in the occupational pattern.

Education:

Education can obviously be treated as the sole agent of change in occupation of Karmakars in Nityanandapur village. Now educated person goes outside. The educated Karmakars are no longer satisfied with playing ascribed roles. Education has also created among group consciousness among them. Most of the educated Karmakar do not want to follow caste calling and consider it as a low status occupation. For instance, Sukumar Karmakar who had education upto Class-IX, told that iron making as disgrace work for him.

Condition of Health:

They think blacksmithy leads to various diseases, particularly there is a possibility to suffer from eye problems, because such a work regressive tool making close to fire. For example Jhaton Karmakar reported that his father twice and gone to the eye specialist through operation. The eye specialist suggested him not to sit in the workshop and close to fire pot.

Availability of caste free occupation:

Most of the Karmakars think that now days there is no restriction to accept the occupation followed by other castes. Now they can opt of any type of occupation according to their own choice.

Training Constraints:

Despite of favourable attitude, most of the Karmakars were unable to learn this calling and acquired necessary skill involved in blacksmithy due to death of their fathers when they were child.

Love marriage:

It is one of the social cause which leads to occupational change. As for example in case of Gouranga Karmakar, before his marriage he had engaged in iron making work. When fell in love with Kalpana, she proposed him if you want to marry me

than you must be changed your present occupation, because she does not like this blacksmithy work. Now Gouranga is a mason.

Not a safe occupation:

The iron making work is not a good and safe job. Those who are engaged in this work the police often suspect them, comment by Bhaga Karmakar. He added, in 1995 Sachin Karmakar was arrested by the Police with a charge of purchasing illegal iron.

The village of Nityanandapur is much closed to Sahapur market. The impact of industry (bidi factory, industry of mango pickle etc. and proximity to Malda town etc. consistently helped to change the occupation of the Karmakars.

In addition, the transport and communication facilities presently available have inspired may Karmakars to look for urban occupations and no hasitation to go Malda town regularly for work. Consideration of nature of work of blacksmithy is a very arduous work and not profitable in economic terms.

Generation and Occupation:

In earlier generation those who were engaged in traditional occupation (first three generation) had no special problem like police search etc. on the other hand migration is also a vital factor of inter-generational mobility. In previous generation joint family was there. But at present nuclear type of family do not served in the same way to maintain their work as blacksmith. So, it may say that intergenerational mobility occurred among the Karmakar of Nityanandapur Village.

It may be considered that ten occupations in this village and assigned some pressure score to them. All these ten occupations have been grouped into six major categories. There are blacksmithy, carpenter, agriculture labour, wage labour, cultivation and petty business and industrialization and increase unemployment people are deviating from their caste occupations.

Out of 31 Karmakar households, it will be try to show their occupational changes over generational by the help of a following table.

Table – 1

Table: Occupation of the Karmakars over generation

No. of House-holds	FFF	FF	F	E
1	Iron making tools/ Kamar/ blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
2	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
3	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
4	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
5	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
6	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
7	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
8	Blacksmith	Home-guard (service)	Blacksmith	Blacksmith
9	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Cultivation	Carpenter
10	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Wage labourer
11	Blacksmith	Tenant	Carpenter	Mason
12	—	Maker of Kachcha house/ Ghorami (local term)	Ghorami	Mason
13	Petty business (salt)	Manager of brick factory	Rickshaw puller	Electric shop
No. of House-holds	FFF	FF	F	E
14	Agricultural	Agricultural labour	Agricultural laboruer	Carpenter
15	—	Agricultural labour	Cultivator (12 bigha land)	Rickshaw puller
16	-	Watchman	Blacksmith	Mason
17	-	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Agricultural labour
18	-	Blacksmith	Agricultural labour	No specific job
19	-	Carpenter	Carpenter	Carpenter
20	-	Cultivation (7 bigha land)	Wage labour	Carpenter

21	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Carpenter
22	-	Cultivation (4 bighas land have)	Agricultural labour	Milk saler / Goala
23	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Paddy processing	Carpenter
24	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Wage labour
25	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Agricultural labour	Wage labour
26	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Middle peasant & work other house (2 bighas lands)	Mason
27	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Wage labour
28	-	Carpenter	Carpenter	Tailor
29	Blacksmith	Carpenter	Wage labour	Masson
30	-	Agricultural labourer	Agricultural labour	Wage labour
31	Carpenter	Agricultural labourer	Agricultural labour	Wage labour

Source: Field work.

Note: FFF – Father's grandfather
FF – Grand father
F – Father
E – Ego

Inter-generational and Intra-generational mobility:

Studies on inter-generational occupational mobility have generally dealt with identifying the direction of and the extent of social change taking into account the changes in the occupational standing of the son relative to his father. While doing so, it is commonly believed that occupational status is highly associated with education, income skill, style of life and social perspective, (Nijhawan, 1969 : 1553).

Out of 31 households, 23 household heads do not follow their ancestral occupation. It has been observed by genealogical table. The rate of the intra-generational analysis of occupational change shows there are seven families who are following blacksmith work and only one family, the head has adopted carpentry occupation. On the whole 20.22% intera-generational mobility took place among the

Karmakars of Nityanandapur village. So, the rate of intra-generational mobility among the Karmakar of village Nityanandapur is very low.

In this context it will cite a specific case-study. Ghurul Karmakar reported that Hemkan Karmakar is his FBS. He got a lower graded job. He had some land (nearly 15 bighas), when he felt that his job payment is few than agriculture. Than he resigned his job and come back his father occupation that is cultivation.

Mobility out of the paternal occupation is dependent on a number of personal and group factors such as education, ambition, familial affiliation etc. on the one hand and the demand or availability factor, on the other. Mobility due to demand factor refers to the movement experienced by sons as a come quince of positions available in different occupations. (Nijhawon, 1969; 1553).

Vertical Mobility:

The direction of occupational mobility may be both horizontal and vertical. In western societies, vertical mobility has received by for the greatest aliention, and perhaps rightly so because horizontal mobility is not much of a problem there. (Singh, 1987: 87).

Those who are educated in this village changed their occupation and they are economically better off. Economically they are not depending to another. Their children are going to school and their standard of living is better than others. For example Sukumar Karmakar is a literate person (IX-Pass) who is a tailor. He earned Rs. 2,000 per month. As a result he is able to spend better for his children's education. Moreover he opened an account in Sahapur Gour Gramin Bank.

From the genealogical table it appears that only in the case of four families have changed their occupation from rickshaw pulling to electrical work (household no. 13), wage labour to carpenter (household no. 20), carpenter to tailor (household no. 28), and wage labour to mason (household no. 29) etc.

In contrast the other Karmakar families may be considered as economically backward. Some kind of downward mobility has been noticed in their cases. There are nineteen families who are engaged in lower occupation.

Explaining such a situation in another context Prof. K.L. Sharma said that downward mobility due to organizational change should be related to structure, ideology and behaviour of the people and its consequences also should be taken into consideration (Sharma, 1980: 117).

Most of the Karmakars people were change their traditional occupation. It is only possible due to abolish of caste bound occupation. Ascribed status replaced in achieved status. But in spite of that very few karmakars hold their forefathers occupation till now.

VI

Conclusion

Along with occupational changes certain changes have taken place in the others spheres of life of Karmakars. Those changes have been noticed in the caste structure, economic life, social ceremonial activities or practices and social participation of the Karmakars.

Reviewing the overall picture of social mobility of the Karmakars it may further say that in many cases downward mobility have been also noticed. The rate of downward and upward mobility is 87.07% and 12.93% respectively. So in the present situation rate of downward mobility is more than the rate of upward mobility. The standard of living of Karmakars is quite low. Moreover individual mobility rather than familial mobility is most usual unit of mobility in case of changing occupation of the Karmakars. But such mobility at individual level ultimately led to bring certain social and economic changes at familial level also.

It is evident from the earlier discussion that occupational mobility of Karmakar community is characterized by mixed trend, some Karmakars still follow their traditional calling and many others have adopted new occupations.

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Table : 1
Distribution of workers by principal occupation and sex

Caste/ Com munit y	To tal Po pu lation	OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES																														%			
		Agricultur al			Wage labour			Cultivatio n			Artisan			Petty Business			Constru ction			Transpo rt &			Professio nal			Bidi Binding			Others				Total Workers		
		M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T				
Kar maka r	36 8	1 6	-	1 6	3 7	-	3 7	0 6	-	0 6	1 8	0 5	2 3	0 8	0 6	1 4	1 0	-	1 0	0 3	-	0 3	-	0 4	0 4	1 1	3 6	4 7	0 2	0 1	0 3	10 5	52	15 7	35.2 9
Mahi shya	28 5	1 3	0 1	1 4	0 4	-	0 4	0 5	-	0 5	1 1	-	1 1	2 1	0 1	2 2	0 3	-	0 3	0 3	-	0 3	0 9	0 3	1 2	0 5	1 7	2 2	0 4	0 3	0 7	78	25	10 3	23.1 4
Napit	10 9	-	-	-	0 1	-	0 1	0 2	-	0 2	0 1	-	0 1	2 0	0 3	2 3	0 2	-	0 2	0 2	-	0 2	-	-	-	-	0 5	0 5	0 2	-	0 2	30	08	38	8.53
Othe rs	11 9	0 3	-	0 3	0 5	-	0 5	0 8	-	0 8	0 2	-	0 2	0 1	-	0 1	0 3	-	0 3	0 2	-	0 2	0 1	-	0 1	0 2	1 1	1 3	0 1	-	0 1	24	11	35	7.87
Santa l	80	2 1	-	4 8	1 2	0 8	2 0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0 1	0 1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	33	36	69	15.5 0
Musli m	13 0	0 3	-	0 3	1 7	-	1 7	0 9	0 1	1 0	-	-	-	-	-	-	0 3	-	0 3	0 3	-	0 3	-	0 2	0 2	-	0 4	0 4	0 1	-	0 1	36	07	43	9.69
Total	10 90	5 6	2 8	8 4	7 6	0 8	8 4	3 0	0 1	3 1	3 2	0 5	3 7	5 0	1 0	6 0	2 1	-	2 1	1 3	-	1 3	1 0	1 0	2 0	1 8	7 3	9 1	1 0	0 4	1 4	30 6	13 9	44 5	100. 00
Percentage		1 8. 3 0	2 0. 1 4	1 8. 8 8	2 4. 8 3	5. 7 6	1 8. 8 8	7. 8 4	0. 7 1	5 . 6 1	1 0. 4 6	3. 6 0	8. 3 1	6. 3 3	7. 1 9	1 3. 4 9	6. 8 7	-	4. 7 1	4. 2 4	-	2. 9 2	3 . 2 6	7. 1 9	4. 5 0	5. 8 9	5 2. 5 1	2 0. 4 4	3 . 2 6	2. 8 8	3 . 1 4	68 .7 7	31 .2 3	10 0.0 0	100. 00

Source: Field Work.