

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OCCUPATIONAL SHIFT OF THE PATTHARKATTA COMMUNITY OF NAWALPARASI (BARDAGHAT SUSTA WEST) DISTRICT, NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Pattharkatta is the ethnic minority community of Nepal having stone-carving as the ancestral occupation. This study was conducted in Sawatkar village of Nawalparasi West district to assess the current status of the occupational shift of the Pattharkattas. A household survey was conducted, and data was analyzed using STATA and MS Excel. From the results, it was found that the respondents started stone-carving from the early average age of 12.64 years. However, in the present day, only about 1/3rd of the respondents had stonecarving as their primary occupation, while the remaining have already shifted to other occupations like agriculture, wage labour and business. The major reasons behind their shift were mass production of modern technologies, low earnings from stonecarving, lack of social prestige, and health hazards due to stone dust. Most of those who shifted were quiet satisfied with their new occupation. This shifting trend shows the decline of caste-based occupation, and projects that such occupations may go extinct sooner or later.

KEYWORDS

Occupation, Pattharkatta, Stone-carving, Traditional, Shift

1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a country with ethnic diversity with a total of 142 distinct castes and ethnic groups residing in Nepal from the high Himalayas to the Terai region of Nepal (CBS, 2021). The ethnic groups are divided into four categories i.e. Brahmin, Kshetri, Vaishya, and Sudra (Joshi, 2017). The Pattharkatta belong to the Dalit community in the caste hierarchy, which lies in the Sudra category. Nepalese culture is fundamentally based on traditional craftspeople (Acharya, 2023). The Dalits of Nepal have specific skills and have their traditional occupations like metalwork, leatherwork, stonework, and music (Bhattachan et al., 2002). The *Kami* are the blacksmiths, the *Sunar* are goldsmiths, *Parki* are the weavers, *Damai* are tailors, *Sarki* and *Chamar* are the leather shoemakers, *Badi* are potters, *Gandharva* are musicians, *Bote* and *Musahar* are fishermen, *Pattharkatta* are stone-carvers, and so on (Nepali, 2008). Dalits have been restricted to these caste-based occupations since the early stages (Acharya, 2023).

Pattharkatta, as the name suggests, refers to those who cut stones. The literal English word for Pattharkatta is 'stonecutter', which denotes a person engaged in cutting or carving stones to make buildings, appliances or decorative items. They are also known as 'Silkat' where sil (*Shila*) means stone and kat (*Katta*) means cutter. Mainly the Pattharkattas manufacture grinding stone, stone vessels and stone idols (Singh et al., 2011). *Loro-silauto*, *okhli*, *chanauto*, *murti*, etc. are their most sold items. Also known as Kushwadiya, Pattharkattas are found to be centered in the western Terai region of Nepal, mostly in Kapilvastu, Banke, Nawalparasi, Rupandehi, Bardiya and Kanchanpur districts (Devkota, 2011). In 2001, the Nepali government officially recognized the Kushwadiya as the indigenous groups (Giri, 2018). Before two decades, they were the least populated Dalits (CBS, 2011). The current population of Pattharkatta in Nepal is 3,343, which constitutes 0.01% of Nepal's total population (CBS, 2021).

Pattharkattas are believed to have originated from India and later migrated to the Terai region of Nepal but no extensive studies are made that prove their origin. Their ancestral occupation is cutting stones. Most

of the Pattharkattas are found following their ancestral occupation but nowadays they are slowly shifting towards varying occupation (Devkota, 2011). The use of modern machinery items is easier, more efficient and less time consuming as compared to the stone-made items which has decreased the use of stone-made materials and brought the occupation of carving stones into risk (Devkota, 2011).

Pattharkatta have ancestral occupation of carving stones to make traditional home appliances like *loro*, *silauto*, *jato*, *okhli*, *chanauto*, etc. Several literatures suggest that most of the Pattharkattas of Nepal were found following their ancestral occupation but nowadays they are slowly shifting towards varying occupation as the use of automated mixers, grinders, machine-made arts has decreased the use of stone-made appliances and brought the occupation of carving stones into risk. As a result, they are adopting a 'Hit and Try' strategy with other possible options in the market (Devkota, 2011). However, no extensive studies have been conducted to assess the level of occupational shift of this indigenous community.

The Pattharkatta community of Nawalparasi (Bardaghat Susta West) have been associated with traditional stone-carving, which is not only an occupation but also their cultural identity. However, it has been witnessed that this community has been shifting their occupation from stone works to service or labour jobs in recent days. As this community belongs to minority groups, it has gained minimal attention from the researchers, policymakers, and government institutions. This study attempts to understand the occupational shift of Pattharkatta community from stone-carving to diverse occupations. The findings of this study will be beneficial for the Pattharkatta communities as the study will highlight their core problems and needs, allowing their voices to be heard. It will also draw the attention of government, local bodies and institutions working with indigenous communities for appropriate and inclusive interventions.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study area

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The study was conducted in Sahuwatikar village of Ramgram municipality in Nawalparasi (Bardaghat Susta West) as it was one of the major residence areas of Pattharkatta community in the district.

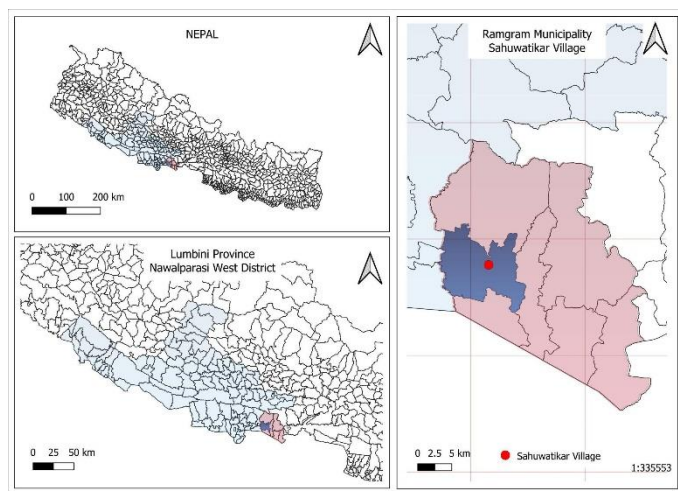


Figure 1: Map of the study area

2.2 Sample size

The total population of the Pattharkatta of the study area was unknown as they were placed in the 'others' section in population distribution being a minority community. A sample size of 28 respondents was taken for the study. The snowball sampling method was used for sampling as the population is sparsely distributed and it was hard to recognize the specific households without directions from their own people.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

Both primary and secondary data were collected for the study.

Primary data: The primary data was collected through a household survey, focus group discussion (FGD), and key informant interview (KII). For the household survey, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared. After pretesting, the questionnaire was further revised as per the relevancies and the interview was carried out.

Secondary data: The secondary data was obtained through a review of the journal articles and publications.

Both qualitative and quantitative data obtained from the study were analyzed by MS Excel 2013 and STATA/MP 17.0.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Socio-economic information

Upon the analysis of the socio-economic information obtained from the household survey, it was observed that the majority of the respondents i.e. 71% were males, whereas only 29% of them were females. It might be because of the patriarchal system of the families, where the household head is male, except only when the male members are dead or are away from home for job prospects. The age group of the respondents was more or less inclusive, with 39%, 32%, and 29% respondents belonging to the young, middle-aged, and old age group respectively. All of them belonged to the Dalit category in the caste hierarchy. When asked about their religion, most of the respondents did not prefer to answer the question. As per the information obtained from the Key Informants, most of the Pattharkattas of the study area changed their religion from Hinduism to Christianity. Similar cases have been mentioned by different authors like (Pariyar et al., 2021).

A huge majority of the respondents i.e. 71.42% were illiterate, 21.42% were literate but did not complete their school level, and only 7.14% of the respondents completed the school level i.e. SLC. It denotes illiteracy as one of the major problems of the Pattharkatta. The average number of family members in the study households was 5 whereas the average number of economically active members in the families was 2.

3.2 Status of traditional occupation

The traditional occupation of the Pattharkattas was carving stones. The major stone-made items they used to carve were *loro*, *silauto*, *jaato*, *okhli*,

and *murti*, as listed from the focus group discussion (FGD). According to the survey results, all of the respondents have learnt to carve the stones. The average age when they started learning stone-carving was 12.64 years of age. None of the respondents received any kinds of formal training or skill development lessons, but learnt from observing their fathers and grandfathers, and daily practice.

It has been observed that only about one-third of the respondents followed their traditional occupation of stone-carving. The remaining population had shifted to other modes of earning. However, all of those who have chosen occupation other than stone-carving i.e. 64% carved stones for their household needs in their leisure time. Sardikhola and Dumkibas were the two major locations from where they fetch stones for carving, for which they have to pay royalty to the government. All of the respondents went door-to-door selling the carved stone items, whereas only 20% of them also sold them at local markets. None of the respondents had ever directly sold their products outside the district.

The average income of the respondents adopting stone-carving as their main occupation was found to be NPR. 11,800 per month. This amount is far less than the basic salary scale of the Nepal government i.e. NPR. 19,500 per month (Sangroula et al., 2020). The respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction level from stone-carving occupation based on a three-point likert scale i.e. satisfied, moderate, and dissatisfied. It was found that 71.42% of the respondents were found to be dissatisfied with their traditional occupation, and the remaining were moderately satisfied.

3.3 Problems in traditional occupation

Various problems have resulted in the dissatisfaction of the Pattharkattas regarding their traditional stone-carving occupation. The major five problems faced by the respondents in their traditional occupation were listed based on the information provided by a key informant, and the respondents were asked to provide a score from 1 to 5 to each problem based on its severity, with 5 being the most severe and 1 - the least severe problem. The major problem was the preference of modern machinery by the buyers followed by less income from the occupation, low social prestige, stone dust resulting in health hazards, and strict royalty policy for purchasing the raw stones. Maharjan also mentioned that the Pattharkattas are facing the market problems as the people are preferring modern technologies over stone-made items, and therefore these groups are forced to switch their occupations (Maharjan, 2023).

Problems	Mean response score	Rank
Preference of modern machineries	4.61	I
Less income	4.39	II
Low social prestige	4.39	II
Health hazards	4.25	III
Royalty policy	3.50	IV

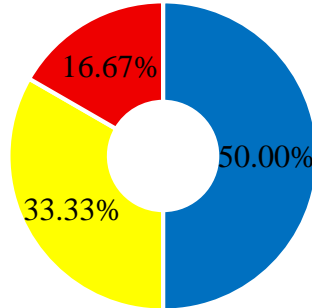
Only 7.14% of the respondents want their upcoming generations to follow the stone-carving occupation. The respondents were asked about the attitude of the younger members of their family about their traditional occupation. Upon calculation, it was observed that the percentage of the new generations having interest in their traditional occupation is null, whereas 46.42% are neutral and 53.57% were found to have paid no interest in their traditional occupation. Previous studies also suggested that the young generation has abandoned caste-based occupations (Prasai, 2021). It denotes that the traditional stone-carving occupation of the Pattharkattas may go extinct in the near future. However, a large portion of the respondents i.e. 57.14% do not care about the extinction. Only 25 % of the respondents worry about the extinction of their ancestral occupation whereas 17.8 % do not think it will go extinct.

3.4 Occupational shift

It was found that 64% of the respondents have adopted occupations other than stone-carving as their major income source. Although all of them mentioned carrying out stone works during their free time or when there is a need for stone items in their household, they do not see stone-carving as their occupation. Majority of those who have shifted their occupation were found to choose agriculture as a major option.

None of the surveyed households had their members involved in government service. The average income from their new occupation was

found to be NPR. 39,583.33 per month. Half of the households left their traditional occupation after Covid 19, although the trend of occupational shift started 14 years ago in their community. In a focus group discussion, they mentioned the major reasons behind leaving their ancestral occupation as less income, low social prestige, declining interest in the stone-carving works, and finding a better opportunity. The majority of literate Dalit youngsters are aware of caste-based oppression, identify new options of livelihood, and do not want to follow in the footsteps of their ancestor's occupation, which may be the reason for opting out of stone-carving tradition (Sunam, 2014).



■ Agriculture ■ Wage labour ■ Business

Figure 2: New occupation of the respondents

Dilkumar Pattharkatta, one of the respondents, said, *"I did not earn enough from stone-carving to provide better education to my children. They also complained about getting bullied by their friends whose parents did white-collar jobs. That really disappointed me and compelled me to shift to my small business"*.

The respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction level from their new occupation based on a three-point likert scale i.e. satisfied, neutral, and dissatisfied. 83.33% of the respondents mentioned that they were satisfied, whereas 16.67% were neutral. All of them agreed that their new occupation paid better. Upon the chi-square analysis of socio-economic factors of the Pattharkattas with the trend of their occupational shift, none of the factors of the respondents - like age, education, and gender had a significant relationship with their change in occupation. It signals that the shift of occupation in the Pattharkattas of the study area was mostly emotion or frustration-driven (Maloney, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

The increased use of modern machinery resulting in lower sales of stone-made goods has led to the ancestral occupation of the Pattharkattas at stake. Besides that, below national average income and low social prestige has compelled them to leave their ancestral occupation. As a result, the Pattharkattas of Sawatkar village of Nawalparasi (Bardaghat Susta West) are shifting towards the other options for livelihood and are earning better and living satisfactory lives from their new occupation. If this trend continues, it is obvious that the traditional occupation of these

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