

The Tea Shop as an Arena of Ethnic Interaction In Nepal

April M. Putnam

The tea shops lining the feeder roads to Narayangad, Chitwan District's main bazaar town, provide an excellent arena for observing interaction between the different caste/ethnic groups that comprise the multi-ethnic population of the Rapti Valley resettlement area. The tea shop is at once a place for relaxation and refreshment, a forum for discussions ranging from local gossip to world affairs, and a place to conduct business. Low status castes may be restricted access to certain areas of the tea shop, but they are not excluded altogether. Since tea at least is virtually neutral in terms of ritual purity, all caste/ethnic groups will drink tea prepared by any "touchable caste" (Nepali: paani chalne jaat). Nor is lack of money a bar since no purchase is necessary and many people seek only a drink of cool water and a seat in the shade. Tea shops thus witness a daily mingling of people from a wide variety of economic and caste/ethnic backgrounds.

The description of a particular tea shop will provide the physical setting in which to visualize the behavior patterns and conversations discussed below. This tea shop, a primarily wood structure with gaps filled in with odd scraps of woven matting, has a half loft providing sleeping space for travelers, and measures roughly 20 by 30 feet. It is somewhat larger than the average village tea shop and its five tables can seat between 20 and 25 people. It is owned and run by a Gurung couple in their mid-thirties who live with their five sons in a small concrete building, once intended to be a cloth store, which forms one wall of the tea shop. The tea shop "household" at one time included a male Brahmin cook in his fifties, a Chyame (low status Newar caste) woman of 45 who cleared tables and washed dishes, her husband and a Chepang male of about 20, both of whom combined agricultural day labor with odd jobs around the tea shop. After seven months at the tea shop the Brahmin cook quit and was replaced by the owner's 20 year old unmarried niece. The tea shop is located on a main feeder road in a small bazaar adjacent to a new agricultural college about 10 miles from the district center. Available food includes: two complete rice meals daily, meat (chicken, wild bird, fish, buffalo) several times a week, tea, milk, bread, chiura (flattened roasted rice), vegetable curry, curd, eggs and raksi (Nepali rice wine).

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The Brahmin cook was hired shortly after the opening of the nearby agricultural college in order to attract Brahmin and Chhetri students. These people, who come primarily from the Terai regions of Nepal and are called madeshi by the local people, were thought to be rather strict about traditional ritual purity/pollution restrictions--particularly in regard to accepting rice from other castes. However, when the Brahmin cook quit and was replaced by a Gurung girl only five of the twenty meal contract students left, and they were quickly replaced by others. The five who left hired a small Brahmin boy to cook for them in their rooms. While the Brahmin cook was working in the tea shop a number of special arrangements for food preparation were made. Vegetables were often peeled and chopped by the Gurung owners but all cooking of rice, vegetables, dhal and acchar was done by the Brahmin as was most of the serving. Meat was cooked by the Gurungs on a small coal stove reserved for that purpose off to the side of the main chulo (Nepali wood-burning stove made of mud-plastered stone or brick), and was ordinarily not served to anyone at the same table as a non-meat eater. These practices were dropped when the Brahmin cook left and it became obvious that the madeshi students were less particular than the local Brahmins and Chhetris who generally limit their consumption to ritually "neutral" foods such as tea, chiura, curd, bread (baked in a commercial bakery in Narayangad) and biscuits when eating in a non-Brahmin tea shop.

The spatial dimension of purity/pollution restrictions, especially as regards untouchable castes (Nepali: paani na chalne jaat), can also be observed in the tea shop. Members of castes such as Kami, Sarki and Damai are tacitly restricted to one table immediately inside the main entrance; in some other shops to a bench under the eaves just outside the entrance. If this table is already occupied untouchables will drink their tea standing up, even if other tables are unoccupied. Untouchables unfamiliar with the tea shop remain standing until their tea is brought and the cook either motions them to sit down at a certain table or simply puts their tea there. Untouchables selling loads of wood are told to put down their loads just outside the tea shop door, while touchable castes are instructed to carry their loads through the tea shop and add them to the wood pile in back.

Individual untouchables make minor deviations from the general pattern above with no apparent adverse reaction. For example, a certain Damai tailor always goes to the cash box located in the middle of the shop to pay. Other untouchables, including this man's brothers, always pay while seated at their allotted table or while standing in the doorway. No one ever indicated verbally or otherwise that he should not be allowed there. It seems that spatial restrictions rely for their maintenance, at least in part, on selfmonitoring by the untouchables themselves.

Untouchables are also expected to wash their own glasses and dishes with water poured by the cook. These dishes are cleared

along with other dirty dishes by the Chyame woman who takes them out back to wash. The chyame woman is not allowed within 3 feet of the chulo which makes the clearing of one table and the storage of cleaned dishes rather difficult. Clean dishes are placed on a center table by the Chyame woman then transferred to shelves behind the chulo by the cook or the owners. Such awkward situations are avoided in other tea shops where the dishwashers are either family members or people of caste/ethnic groups nearly equal in ritual status with the owners'.

Patterns can also be discerned in the spatial distribution of other groups in the tea shop but are much less clear-cut. For example, on brisk winter mornings people delivering milk (Gurung, Brahmin and Newar) squat on the floor around the chulo to get warm. Other people who avail themselves of this privilege are the meal contract students, the Gurung and Tamang men who play cards with the owner, and a number of relatives. Other members of these same caste/ethnic groups who do not have such regular social or economic contact with the owners are rarely seen near the chulo. Untouchables and deshis (all Indians are called deshi in this area, they are primarily semi-skilled seasonal laborers from Bihar) are never seen near the chulo, although deshis can and do sit at any table in the shop. It is not uncommon for the tea shop owners to demand to see their money first before serving anything to deshis or untouchables. These two groups do not have the option, as do other groups, of working off the price of a cup of tea by washing out a few dishes. Whenever possible deshis avoid sitting at the same table with Nepalis and vice versa. Tharus seem always to sit as close to the entrance as possible and leave as soon as they've finished their tea.

Keeping in mind these behavioral expressions of ethnic interaction in the tea shop let us turn now to people's perceptions of ethnically ascribed similarities and differences as revealed in their conversations. Resettlement areas such as the Rapti Valley bring together peoples of diverse caste/ethnic identity as well as representatives of regional variations within each caste/ethnic group. People are curious about their various types of neighbors and are concerned with how their own group fits into the local social and economic hierarchy. It is not surprising then that many tea shop conversations reflect this interest and concern, ranging from discussions of the "new Nepal" where all castes will be equal, to a sharing of information on one's own and others' castes, to ethnic stereotypes and jokes expressing an underlying competition and hostility between different groups.

i

Changes in the accepted modes of ethnic interaction are often a source of contention between the generations as shown in the following conversation between a group of older men (50 to 60 years old) and two young men (20 to 25 years old) sitting in a Gurung tea shop:

Two older men, one Tamang and the other Gurung, were discussing how young boys no longer care for their religion or their caste--they eat from the hands of untouchables and marry outside their caste. They were interrupted by a young Tamang man who said, "why shouldn't we do these things? Everyone bleeds when they are cut, all are the same. Only skin color is different". The elder Tamang replied that while things might be clear to the young people he found all the changes puzzling. Changes in everything, even the clothes people wear. When he was a boy only lahures (soldiers) wore pants, now even the small boys do. Another old Tamang joined in, "nowadays the young men will marry even a Kami, Damai or Sarki girl, if only she is beautiful. They don't need their religion, only beauty". The old Gurung added that Brahmins are now marrying Gurung, Tamang and Chhetri girls and other castes do the same. He complained that the educated boys and girls married whoever they pleased no matter how much their parents protested. They want to live separately from their parents and will not obey them even though these parents went to a lot of trouble to educate them. "They make their parents stupid". The young Tamang replied, "how should you obey your parents, by carrying them on your back?" He was interrupted by a young Gurung who said in a conciliatory tone, "listen, not only the young people have changed. You men also wear pants now because the fashion has changed. So many things have changed since you were young". The young Tamang spoke up again to declare his intention of marrying a girl of another caste. An older Gurung jokingly said the boy would probably marry a Kami or Damai girl since so many pretty ones lived near his house. The general laughter was cut by the serious tone of the old Tamang man as he said, "listen, whatever you do don't marry an untouchable". The Young Tamang conceded he would probably marry a Touchable caste girl, but went on to say that in a few years this untouchable system would be fully abolished. As the group broke up and moved out of the tea shop an old Gurung said, "gradually all the old ways will be lost".

Immediately apparent is the shared belief that change has and will continue to occur and that the older generation feels powerless to prevent this change however they may dislike it. It should be noted however that of all the households in the panchayat where these people live, only 3% include a cross-caste marriage. All of these cross-marriages involve touchable castes. Many young people talk about marrying out of their caste but few in fact have done it. Eating with untouchables is increasingly common among young people of touchable castes, particularly those with a high school education, but the food is almost never prepared by an untouchable. The Gurung's comment that Brahmins marry out of their caste and others do the same, implies the commonly expressed view that the Brahmins' laxity in following their traditions has led other groups astray by setting a bad example.

ii

The following brief example is typical of the use of ethnic stereotypes in a humorous exchange of insults:

A local "taxi" broke down in front of a Gurung tea shop and after some time the Brahmin driver/owner and his Gurung assistant came in for tea. Soon they were arguing about the broken down vehicle. The Brahmin told the Gurung helper, "you're a sheep, no wonder you couldn't fix the motor". The helper answered back, "anyone who wears a buffalo's intestine can't know more than I do". He went on to say, "Brahmins' brains have been affected by all the wine and chicken they eat nowadays". They finished their tea and as the Brahmin rose to leave he called to his assistant, "come sheep, and learn how to fix a motor by watching me".

The reference to sheep means "stupid as a sheep" and is part of the standard stereotype of Gurungs as honest and stupid (sometimes phrased "too stupid to be dishonest"). The buffalo's intestine mockingly refers to the sacred thread, symbol of ritual superiority worn by Brahmins and Chetris, and is a commonly used epithet. Groups such as Gurung, Tamang, Newar, etc. often accuse Chitwan Brahmins of eating meat and drinking wine while continuing to deny it publicly and criticising those who do. The humorous mood was sustained throughout the exchange with the speakers themselves joining in the general laughter that followed each verbal salvo. Joking of this type is not uncommon and occasionally becomes an escalating exchange of insults in which hostilities emerge and serious accusations of misbehavior are made. An example of this is the following exchange among a group of men (2 Brahmins, one Gurung, and one Magar) playing cards in a Gurung tea shop:

The Magar discarded the joker by mistake and did not realize it until the Brahmin next to him picked it up. The Magar said, "don't take that, I threw it by mistake, give it to me". The other Brahmin said, "you fool, why did you throw it? Really, Magars and Gurungs are idiots and fools". The Gurung jokingly replied, "you can't say that, Gurungs are not as before. Never say such things to Gurungs because now we can compete with you greedy Brahmins". The Brahmin who had picked up the joker laughed and said, "no, you can never match the Brahmins". The other Brahmin told them to quiet down and play cards. The Magar angrily burst out, "Brahmins are exploiters". When the Brahmin looked at him sharply the Magar said, "don't cry Daangre. You Brahmins are like Daangre and never tire of making noise". The Brahmin had no chance to reply because at that moment his father came in and asked him if he intended to play cards all day when he should be home working.

A Daangre is a bird similar to a mynah, known for its raucous cries, and is sometimes considered a sorcerer's familiar. One Brahmin and the Gurung attempted to keep things on a humorous level but the Magar was genuinely upset and his comments were not meant as jokes.

iii

Interest in other groups and their customs generates the sharing of information about one's own and other groups as indicated in the following two examples.

A Gurung tea shop proprietress commented to another female Gurung that there was no point in their going to the nearby Tamang argun (2 to 3 day Buddhist ceremony for the deceased) the next day since Tamangs, unlike Gurungs, have no dancing at their arguns. Her friend agreed and added that it wasn't very interesting to watch lamas just sit and chant. A Tamang male seated at a nearby table joined in the conversation by saying it was true that Tamang lamas do not dance during argun, nor do they have sergo (dance done by laymen) like the Gurungs. But if the women wanted to see dancing they should come the following evening, after the ceremony itself was finished when there would be hours of singing and dancing.

Apart from the comparison of customs, this example also reminds us that people do attend other groups' ceremonies and have a first hand chance to note differences in behavior patterns.

Three Gurung young men were sitting in a tea stall when one of them commented on two Tharu girls walking past the tea shop, calling them "black beauties". Another of the young men pointed out they were unmarried, explaining he could tell this because the girls' arms and legs were not tattooed as is the custom among married Tharu women. He went on to favorably describe some aspects of Tharu village life, especially their egalitarian nature. Even a haruwa (a landless laborer attached to a particular landholder) could through hard work buy land and become an important zamindar (landlord). The first young man asked what the difference was between Tharus and Darais, saying that they seemed the same to him. The other replied that the two groups are vastly different. He said the Tharus came from India and the Darais from the hills of Nepal, being called Kumal in the hills and Darai in the Terai. He also noted that the women wore different colored clothes and each group had its' own style of singing and dancing.

The young Gurung describing the Tharus and Darais to his friends has lived near a Tharu village for some 10 years. His proposed origins for the two groups might be contested by scholars (see Bista: 1967: pp. 118-133). It should also be mentioned that his comments, like those of most people living near a Tharu village,

were either neutral or favorable. People who lack such close contact on the other hand are quick to stereotype Tharus as semi-civilized jungle dwellers.

These few examples should give some idea of the scope of conversations dealing with ethnic topics. The variations are of course almost endless when it is considered that conversation content is influenced by the relative ages and education backgrounds of the speakers as well as the presence or absence of a member of the group being discussed.

Migrants to a multi-ethnic resettlement area like the Rapti Valley must adjust to a new social environment as well as to a physical environment usually quite different from their birth place. The tea shop is one public arena for the continuous process of inquiry, accomodation and confrontation between members of different groups.

Reference

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