

4.3 Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of Bankariya Community

Introduction

The Bankariya community, consisting of 93 individuals residing in 21 households within Manhari Rural Municipality-4 of Makwanpur, Bagmati Province, Nepal, is an indigenous minority group. They are deprived of the constitutional right to shelter.

For over three centuries, the ancestors of the Bankariya community roamed the rugged hills of the north-western region of Makwanpur District as nomads. Their history dates back more than 300 years, a testament to their enduring presence in the area. It was only three decades ago that they were officially recognized as a minority community with a distinct identity. Their deep connection to the forest (Ban) earned them the name “Bankariya,” as expressed by advocates dedicated to improving their circumstances (Bista, 2023).

The Bankariya community is similar to the Chepang ethnic group who resides in the north-western region of Makwanpur District as nomads. Although they have their distinct mother tongue, only a limited number of words from it remain in common use. They predominantly speak and understand Nepali. Their settlement in Manahari Rural Municipality-4, Musedhaap, has been a relatively recent development, spanning just two decades, as they transition to a more settled lifestyle.

In Nepal, there are 59 indigenous communities, each classified into one of five categories: developed, deprived of

privileges, marginalized, highly marginalized, and on the verge of extinction. As per the Commission of Indigenous Peoples and the 2021 census of Nepal, 10 indigenous communities are facing the threat of extinction. Among them are the Bankariya, Raute, Meche, Raaji, Lepcha, Kushwadiya, Haayu, Kisan, Kusunda, and Surel communities (Indigenous community, 2022).

Status of Lifestyle and Access to Government Services

Recognizing the unique identity of the Bankariya community, which is distinct from any other group in the country, special arrangements were made for their settlement in Ward 4 of Manahari Rural Municipality. They were relocated from their traditional shelters in caves and huts to this new area. As they adapt to the modern social setting, they are in the process of establishing their identity. However, they lack awareness about their political and civil rights, which are crucial for their well-being. Despite this, they have specific demands, with their primary request being the acquisition of marshy lands for their settlements. Without adequate research and protection, this community is at risk of extinction (Rajesh, 1994).

Obsolescent Indigenous Allowance

The Nepal government has extended financial support to 10 indigenous communities, whose population falls below 10,000, as per the 2011 census, recogniz-

ing their status as indigenous groups. Every individual belonging to the Bankariya community is entitled to a monthly allowance of NPR 4000 from the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration. This allowance is granted upon the issuance of a birth certificate. As per the records of the Manahari Rural Municipality, 85 members of the Bankariya community are currently benefiting from this allowance as of the fiscal year 2023/24. However, it is worth noting that not all members of the community are availing themselves of this support, possibly due to insufficient data collection (Bhattarai, 2023).

Economic Aspect and Livelihood

In the past, the forest served as the primary livelihood for the Bankariya Community, where they lived and depended on for survival. Gathering wild fruits was a common practice of providing sustenance for their families. Without personal land, they sold wild fruits and vegetables like bananas, oranges, bamboo shoots, asparagus, and mushrooms in local markets. However, this practice has waned over time.

Today, the community faces challenges in finding permanent and sustainable sources of income due to the lack of stable employment opportunities. Many members now work as agricultural laborers, take on daily wage jobs, operate water mills, or engage in rock breaking for construction projects. They have been allocated two Katthas of land by Parsa National Park. The lands along riversides and in highlands are unsuitable for agriculture. They cultivate crops such as paddy, maize, and seasonal produce, which sustain them for only four months. After that, they are compelled to return to the forests in search of additional food sources.

Since relocating to Musedhaap, women in the community have initiated

savings activities aimed at generating income.

As part of the “Prime Minister at Citizen’s Home” campaign in 2011, the then Prime Minister of Nepal, Baburam Bhattarai, spent a night in the Bankariya settlement. Following this, the local government supported the development of the house where he stayed, intending to convert it into a homestay. Despite efforts to create a three-room homestay, it has yet to generate significant income.

In recent times, some community members have turned to activities such as soap making, incense production, and sewing to improve their economic prospects. However, they lack the necessary skills to make that as their professions. While soap making is underway, the lack of access to markets and the inability to purchase raw materials have hindered progress toward sustainability (Bakariya, 2023).

Crisis of Shelter

In Bankariya, the key challenges on the horizon include the absence of land ownership, limited employment opportunities, and a shortfall in local production. The majority of residents lack concrete housing. Back in around 2006, the District Forest Office in Makawanpur stepped in and granted a lease for a forest area in Musedhaap of Manahari for 20 years (Bista, 2023). This move, despite not conferring land ownership, marked a turning point in the community’s economic fortunes. With this land, their livelihoods began to improve gradually (Dhakal, 2023).

Similarly, Manahari Rural Municipality has been actively engaging in various initiatives to support and uplift the Bankariya Community. They have erected gabion walls along riverbanks, facilitated access to clean drinking water and electricity, and sustained the homestay program. Additionally, they’ve provided buffaloes and goats to foster income gen-

eration among the locals. However, the endeavor to construct buildings for the citizen shelter program faces challenges due to the land being under the ownership of Parsa National Park.

In the meantime, 10 houses have been built under the citizen shelter program, thanks to the land provided by Manahari Rural Municipality (Thapa, 2023). However, the process of handing over these houses according to priority faces delays. At the same time, Parsa National Park is exerting pressure on the community to vacate the land they currently inhabit. Despite the community not being able to relocate promptly, the land cannot be transferred to individual names, as per park policy, and could be reclaimed by the park authorities. Given the government's responsibility to ensure safe settlements for indigenous peoples, resolving this issue ultimately requires government intervention to relocate the community (Khatiwada, 2023).

Because they lack land ownership, the community has not received the homes promised by the government. Moreover, their settlement is wedged between rivers on both sides, leaving them vulnerable even if they relocate from the forest (Bankariya, 2023).

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Bankariya Community submitted a heartfelt letter to Rajendraman Shrestha, the Minister of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Development of Bagmati Province, on July 23, 2023 (Ekagaj, 2023) regarding the fear of being forced back into the forest once the current leased forest is reclaimed. Despite community members seeking work opportunities outside their area, there has been no significant emigration observed (Bankariya, 2023).

Cultural Status

Recognizing the importance of their language is crucial for preserving the very essence of the Bankariya com-

munity, as stated in a study by Rai (2023). According to the study, only a maximum of five individuals are proficient in speaking the Bankariya language. It's imperative for the government to step up efforts to preserve this language. There's a looming threat of extinction for their way of life in today's fast-paced society. Therefore, the government should prioritize not only their security allowance, shelter, health, and education but also focus on safeguarding their unique identity and existence. So, the government must focus on protection and conservation of their language and culture. If it is not initiated, their existence will reach to the edge of extinction (Gautam, 2023).

Tribhuvan University, with the support of the Language Commission, embarked on a scientific exploration of the Bankariya language, as highlighted by Bista (2022). The study, conducted by the Central Department of Linguistics, concluded that Bankariya indeed possesses its own unique language, as noted by Rai (2017). The researcher emphasized that preserving the Bankariya culture poses a significant challenge. Without safeguarding their cultural heritage, their very existence hangs in the balance. Their cultural rights are under threat, underscoring the urgent need for protection and preservation efforts.

Conclusion

The Bankariya community faces obstacles in participating in economic endeavors due to the absence of permanent, self-owned homes. They constantly live under the shadow of potential relocation because the land they inhabit falls under the jurisdiction of Parsa National Park. This lack of ownership rights in their current location hampers their ability to establish themselves firmly in the area.

As per Article 18 (1) of Nepal's Constitution, all citizens are viewed equally under the law. Likewise, Article 18 (3) emphasizes the importance of not hinder-

ing special measures aimed at protecting, conserving, and empowering marginalized communities, regions, and minorities. Building upon these constitutional provisions, the Government is anticipated to launch various campaigns and initiatives to uplift the Bankariya community.

The most urgent matter that needs immediate attention for safeguarding the

Bankariya Community is ensuring they have adequate shelter. Additionally, to make their livelihoods more sustainable and manageable, it's essential to provide them with land for agriculture, employment opportunities, and the preservation of their cultural identity.

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