

4.5 The Socioeconomic and Political Dynamics of the Khuna and Sonaha Communities in Banke and Bardia

The minority Khuna and Sonaha castes of Banke face alienation from political access, as well as limitations in their economic and social lives. On 2 December, 2015, the Supreme Court ordered the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, the Office of the Prime Minister, and Council of Ministers to enlist the Sonahas in the schedule related to section 2 (a) of the Indigenous Nationalities Act, 2002 but that remains yet to be implemented. Even the most recent census does not record the Khuna and Sonaha people as distinct identities. . Sonaha communities reside on the western bank of the Karnali River in Bardia District, including in Rajipur, Murghauwa, Chanaura, Loharpur, Parseni, Khairichandanpur, Lalpur and other areas. The Sonaha community is also located in Ballia and Munuwa in Kailali District, as well as Mahendranagar, Udalpur, and Pipraiya in Kanchanpur District. The origin and naming of the Khuna caste, located in Rapti Sonari Rural Municipality-1 Bhamka, remain uncertain as no concrete evidence has been found. However, two theories are mentioned in Hariprasad Timilsina’s study book on the Endangered Khuna Caste. The first theory suggests a migration from Ayodhya, India, while the second theory connects the name “Khuna” to a local term for anger or frustration in the Rapti region, gradually evolving into the caste name “Khuna.” Similarly, the Sonaha caste also lacks written documentation about its origin and lineage tradition. The Sonahas themselves are not aware of their caste’s origin, but it is believed that

their ancestors originated from Ayodhya, India, and some may have come from a temple associated with Thakurdw.

The Khuna and Sonaha communities have traditionally fished or panned for gold along the banks of the Rapti and Karnali rivers. Bhuvan Khuna, a leader and teacher of the Khuna community, estimates the community to have a population of approximately 500 in Rapti Sonari, Bardia, Kailali, and Kanchanpur districts of Sudurpaschim Province. The Sonaha caste has experienced a decline in population due to daughters marrying into other castes.

Similarly, the Sonaha community’s traditional occupation has also been prospecting for gold mining, fishing, and rowing boats across the Karnali River, all of which have recently been threatened. Social worker Dayaram Khadka estimates that about 1,200 Sonaha people live in Kailali and Kanchanpur districts; with no estimates for the population in Bardia District.. The Sonaha caste, being a minority group, faces dire economic and social conditions due to the disruption in their traditional occupations. This threat to traditional occupation of communities has made it difficult for them to secure their economic, social, and cultural rights.

In Districts like Banke and Bardia in Nepal, there are many different groups of people, including tribals, Dalits, Brahmins, Chhetri, Muslims, and others. Some of these groups get support from the government because they are recognized as minorities. But the Khuna and Sonaha castes, despite being minorities, don’t receive this support. It is important for

the government to stop treating them as endangered groups and make sure they know about and can use their cultural and other rights.

A State of Deprivation

The Constitution of Nepal entitles every citizen to fundamental rights. Article 31(1) guarantees the right to basic education and Article 35(1) ensures the right to free basic health services. Additionally, Article 33 (1) grants the right to employment. The provisions enshrined the UN Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guarantee these rights. However, despite implementation of these legal provisions in addressing the wellbeing of minority communities, the Khuna and Sonaha communities continue to face multiple challenges. They have also been denied access to adequate economic, social, and political rights. Furthermore, differences in language and customs, as well as variations in the names of materials used for gold extraction, highlight the unique challenges faced by these communities.

Prior to the decision of the national park management, the Khuna and Sonaha people were living along the banks of the river, making a living of the gold panned from the sands and fishing. However, they have faced difficulties after both, Banke and Bardia National Parks banned prospecting for gold and fishing in rivers within their boundaries. Today, the Sonaha people of Patabhar, Daulatpur and Manau settlement of Bardiya face severe livelihood problems and remain deprived of their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. The displacement from the riverbanks has caused them problems of fuel, housing and clothing, along with depriving them of means to support the education of children, healthcare and social development.

The 'National Parks and Wildlife Protection Act, 1973 prohibits the con-

struction of fences, mining, and killing of wild animals, including fish within the protected area. This provision directly affects the Khuna and Sonaha communities, particularly without other measures to assist them towards generating a livelihood.

The existing categorization places the Khuna and Sonaha groups under the larger Tharu group, which according to the groups, is misguided, demanding recognition of their own identities, languages, cultures, and permit to practice their historical occupation.

Impact of Deprivation on Economic and Social Life

The Constitution of Nepal states that as a fundamental right, every citizen has the right to access basic education. The National Education Policy 2019 has started to achieve remarkable achievements in the education sector of Nepal and the development of educational infrastructure. The total enrollment rate in pre-primary education has reached 84.7 %. The percentage of children enrolled in class 1 with early childhood development experience has reached 66.9. Children of the Khuna and Sonaha communities deprived school from child development education. Despite being admitted to school, it is a challenge to stay in school due to lack of finances and geographical difficulties. School enrollment rate of children of Khuna and Sonaha communities is very low. After the traditional profession in crisis, they are forced to go to other places in Nepal and India for six months with their families and children.

Only four people in the community have completed bachelor's level education, 10 have passed high school, and about 20-25 people have passed the secondary level. After grade 5, students must go across the river for further studies, which serves as a major obstacle. The financial situation of families prevents those who

have passed the 12th grade from pursuing higher education.

People of Khuna and Sonaha Communities are deprived of their right to health which is the fundamental right of every citizen as per the Constitution of Nepal. They have no access to the health insurance policy of the Nepal Government. They are forced to wait even for a general vaccination. Similarly, due to unavailability of proper health facilities, they are facing problems in receiving services like vaccination, maternity services and more. They cannot afford expensive private health institutions owing to their weak economic status.

Both communities are landless and barely have lands for agricultural productions. They are forced to flee towards India after they were deprived of their traditional livelihood activities by the National Park. Some khunahas have started to engage in agriculture on leased lands.

Attributing to backwardness in economic, social, cultural, and educational status, Sona and Khuna people are politically backward too. Bhuwan Khuna, social activist Dukhuna Khuna were in ward chairmanship during Panchayat system and Durga Khuna was elected proportionate member at the Provincial House of Representatives of Sudurpashchim in 2017 election. In the Local Level Election of Nepal, 2022, Laxmi Sonaha was elected as ward member in Geruwa Rural Municipality. But, in general, people of these communities are deprived of identity and their rights. Government of Nepal too has no formal records on population, arts, and culture of these communities.

Efforts Made by Government and Non-government Organizations

In 2010, an organization named “Khuna Utthan Samaj” was established to uplift the Khuna community. Bhu-

wan Khuna chaired the committee, but it was largely ineffective due to the lack of adequate funds. Another organization, Sonaha Development Himalipur, led by Krishna Thapa, has also been working towards empowerment of the Sonaha people. Under the Citizens Shelter Program, 95 houses were built by the government for the Sonaha group. However, people of both the Sonaha and Khuna communities are deprived of exams in reserved quotas for civil service and government positions because they are not listed in the minority category by the state.

The Rapti Sonari Rural Municipality has also been making some efforts to improve the access of the Khuna community to education, health, and economic opportunities. There are scholarships provided to Khuna children, along with health camps offering basic services. The Municipality encourages the Khuna people to earn incomes through both agricultural and non-agricultural means. There is lack of awareness in Khuna Community which possess its unique language and culture. They have weak economic, social and political status. A planned project to build tin houses for 35 Khuna households in the next fiscal year is in place.

Conclusion

Nepal’s census, conducted every 10 years, has not designated a separate count for these two minority communities although they have a distinct language, culture, occupation, and lifestyle. This has resulted in their grouping with other communities, further limiting their access to state opportunities and services. Their traditional professions, such as gold mining and fishing, have been in crisis since the ban within the National Park area, resulting in economic hardship.

Citizens Shelter Program covers only limited number of families, the state needs to include all remaining households in such initiatives. The weak economic

situation of the communities is seriously affecting children's access to basic and higher education. In order to strongly address the challenges faced by Khuna and Sonaha communities, the state should formulate and implement an action plan to empower the Khuna and Sonaha communities through skill-building programs, enabling them to become self-reliant.

Recommendation

- ▶ Scholarships should be arranged for higher education opportunities for children from the Khuna and Sonaha castes.
- ▶ Employment opportunities should be provided for individuals who have pursued higher education.
- ▶ Statistics of the Khuna and Sonaha castes should be included in the national census to ensure accurate representation.
- ▶ The Khuna and Sonaha castes should be officially recognized and opportunities should be created based on inclusiveness.
- ▶ Skill-based programs should be implemented to empower individuals from the Khuna and Sonaha communities, promoting self-reliance.

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