

NATS OF MIRZAPUR: CONTINUITY AND CULTURE CHANGE

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This paper deals with continuity and culture change existing among the Nats of Mirzapur. It is based on fieldwork conducted by me during 1998 to 2003 among the Nats of Mirzapur district in Uttar Pradesh applying participant observation method to get the empirical information about them. Some secondary sources have also been used to compile the latest information and history of the nomadic Nat tribes and their cultures. It is found that in present time, the Nats prefer the same traditional professions as honey collection, mat making, rope dancing and snake charming, gymnastic and circus play activities etc. they had done long years ago in order to continue their livelihood and survival in this fast changing period of economic liberalization although the younger generation among them have followed secondary occupations as rickshawpulling, unskilled labour etc. This paper highlights how the Nat community suffers from its historical dislocation and exploitation by rulers in different historical phases and how and in what manner they are responsible for their present lifestyle and culture adopted by them. In other parts of the country many nomadic tribals are somewhat similar to the Nats and they are almost facing the same *culture of poverty*. Although they are indigenous and socio-culturally rich, they are still *marginalised*, deprived and disadvantaged because the state policy and programmes are not affecting them, therefore they face underdevelopment and backwardness in contemporary times. It is seen that such tribal groups like Nats living in various parts of Mirzapur deceived by the mirage of political promises and by-passed by modernisation and development continue to be overwhelmingly illiterate and suffer poverty on account of their low levels of living and under-privileged status even after six decades of independence. It seems that the state has no proper plans to upgrade their social status and enhance their culture. Therefore, there is a great scope for policymakers, academicians and planners to rethink and formulate effective policy for Nats in this fast changing economic period. The social change among such tribes over the last several decades is not really a systematic and coherent one, rather it is a haphazard and imbalanced change. Several factors are involved in it. The paper discusses in detail and presents the full picture for further deliberation.

Introduction

Nats are vagrant tribes. They are generally nomadic people and are considered to be inhabitants of Rajasthan originally (Singh, 1971). Historically, they are the original descendents of the gypsy tribes of India (Majumdar, 1961). A long history of survival tells a lot about them. According to Bhargava (1949) when the Muslim ruler AllaUddin Khilji attacked on Rajputana in 1308, he captured the whole Chittorgarh of Rana Pratap. At that time, they were recruited as the soldiers of Rana Pratap, the king of Chittorgarh. Some among them had converted themselves as Muslims under the pressure of Islam while others due to the fear of not accepting Islam acted as nomadic persons, called themselves as nomads from unknown places and kept their identities undisclosed. Since then these people began to flee away

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and adopted the nomadic way of life. In the course of time, they have migrated to various places during the intervening centuries. Rajasthan is a historical place relating to various nomads because they trace their ancestors from the Great Rajputana of Mewar.

‘Nat’ Community in Ancient Literature

According to ancient Sanskrit literature ‘Nata’ means dancer or clever. Nat-nati (feminine is ‘Natni’) episode has become most popular one during the beginning of the old Sanskrit drama *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* written by Mahakavi Kalidas and *Shudrak*. In that period they had been acting as the *Sutradhar* or an intermediate person between the audience and the actors who play well before any episode of the drama begins. They have played with such an immense power that the audiences had never been deprived of entertainment during those times. In other words, it can be said that they were acting as an intermediary role between the audience group and the play. In real sense, they always have strong capacity to lead the people through their inherent talent by birth. Now in the present time also, they are more interested to play on harmonium and other musical instruments as trumpet leather bean and organ pipe etc. resonating with melodious songs along with their company as one way of earning money for their livelihood. Their occupations now, are, however, varied depending upon the group of the community they adopt to live in.

The evidences about their skilled acrobatic performance are justified. In Prakrit literature ‘*natvidya*’ has been mostly referred for the skills and knowledge of certain communities at that time. According to *Rigveda* Aryan had given Indra who was the king of all Gods as the name ‘*Natraj*’ meaning of which the ‘King of Nats’. Since then *Natraj* became so popular as it is also used for Lord ‘Shiva’. According to *Maharshi Panini* literature the ‘Nat’ dhatu means dancing and acting in drama. At that time, 22 acrobats have been referred in Prakrit group. According to Panini, Shilalin was a Nat. Malik Mohammed Jayasi, an ancient writer has written in his famous text ‘*Padmavat*’ about ‘*Natni*’, Dholni, Bedini and Shahnaini..... showing the characteristics of ‘Nat women’ that they were expert in singing and dancing.

As far as the healing capacities are concerned, there are also evidences that Aryan has worshipped ‘Varuna’ who always saved God from ‘*Yakshma*’ in modern period known as Tuberculosis disease. They have worshipped him and performed rituals to save people from tuberculosis. In ‘*Atharvaveda*’, these all have been described through different Sanskrit slokas, giving justifications about the healing capacities and medicinal knowledge of this group of nomadic tribal communities. According to ‘*Charaksamhita*’ an ancient text, there is interesting illustration that among the nomadic communities there is more possibility to possess herbal drugs. It could be speculated that in that era, Nats as nomads, most probably, would have been suppliers of herbal medicines also.

Their professions today are based on their socio-economic practices generating self-employment as traditional socio-cultural occupations as well as ethno-medical profession. Socio-cultural occupations include various professions like singing, dancing and acrobatics etc. and they sometimes perform gymnastic activities around a gathering of the people. Some among them have also acquired expertise in catching the different poisonous snakes and perform shows of snakes and other reptiles. They are also snake charmers and are often called as *Saperas*. In short, we can say that their acrobatic performances, gymnastic activities, wrestling skills and other related activities are very much related to their economy. They are somewhat also related to health and hygienic practices for money purposes. Besides, they are also grass-cutters and beggars as usually seen in Mirzapur district in large numbers.

Nat Community in Colonial Ethnography

According to the colonial official ethnographer Crooke (1973 reprint) the origin of Nats is not definitely known and there are numerous sections and subsections of Nats and each of the sections especially in Mirzapur is of totemistic origin. The tribal organisation of the Nats elsewhere is very complex and it is often difficult to distinguish them from other vagrant tribals. Most of the Nats have returned themselves as Hindus though there are some Muslims among them. The Nats are found also in Madhya Pradesh, Bombay and Bengal. Their main occupation is singing and dancing, acrobatics, conjuring, manufacture of articles out of fibres and grass, straw and reed which they sell. They also dispense medicines for incurable diseases and lost vitality. Their women are of easy virtue and are a source of their income. The Nats keep dogs and hunt and eat vermin and small animals. They are also expert rope dancers and other acrobatic performances as magic show, single and double stick playing (lathi fighting show), gymnastics, etc. These different types of occupations they follow from season to season make the overall economic system of the Nat community everywhere.

According to *Oldham Ghasipur Memo*, a tribe of so called gypsy dancers, acrobats and prostitutes who are found scattered all over the provinces. The problem of the origin and ethnological affinities of the Nats is perhaps the most perplexing within the whole range of the ethnography of Northern India. The real fact seems to be that the name Nat is an 'occupational term' which includes a number of different clans who have been grouped together merely on account of their common occupation of dancing, prostitution and performances of various primitive industries.

According to *Bombay Gazetteers* (1889), "The same people are identical at least in occupation with the *Kolhatis* of Bombay who are also known as *Dombari*. Their main occupations are rope dancers and tumblers as well as the makers of small buffaloe horn pulleys which are used with cart ropes in fastening loads. They also make hide combs and gunpowder flasks. When a girl comes of age, she is called to choose between marriage and prostitution. They worship ma Bhawani,

Hanuman, khandoba and the cholera Goddess *Mariari*, but their favourite and as they say their only living gods are the bread winners or hunger scarers, the drum, the rope and the balancing pole.

About two centuries ago, in the provinces of Bengal the people known as Nar, Nat, Nartak or Natak form the dancing and musician class of Eastern Bengal. On the other hand many of the people in these provinces were classified as Nats. The Bazigars, Saperas and Kabutari are classed in Western Bengal with the Bediya who in Northern India are undoubted kinsfolk of Sansya, Habura and similar vagrant races.

According to *Ibbetson*, "The Nats with whom we include the Bazigar, form a gypsy tribe of vagrant class who wander about with their families settling for a few days or weeks in the vicinity of large villages or towns and they also construct temporary shelters of grass. In addition to practising acrobatic feats and conjuring a low class, they make articles of grass, straw and reeds for sale. In the centre of the Punjab they are said to act as *Mirasis*, though this is perhaps doubtful. They practise surgery and physic in a small way and are not free from the suspicion of sorcery. They are said to be divided into two classes, those whose males only perform as acrobats and those whose women called Kabutari, perform and prostitute themselves. About three quarters of their numbers returned themselves as Hindus and most of the rest as Musalmans. They mostly marry by *circumambulation (phera)* and burn their dead, but they are really out castes keeping many dogs with them with which they hunt and eat the vermin of the jungles. They are said especially to reverence to Goddess Devi, Guru Teg Bahadur, the guru of the Sikh scavengers and Hanuman or the monkey God, the last because of the acrobatic power of the monkeys. They generally trace their origin to Marwar, and are found all over the western provinces except on the Frontier where they are almost unknown.

There seems then, very little doubt that under the general name Nat are included various tribes, some of whom are closely allied to the vagrant criminal races like the Sansya, Beriyas and Haburas, also find a well pronounced totemistic section system among some of the so-called sub-castes, that it seems possible that they have some *Dravidian* relationship as well.

TABLE 1: TRIBAL ORGANISATION OF THE 'NATS'

S.No.	Sub Castes	Sections	Main Occupation	Religion
1.	Gwaliyari	Kapuri, Bhatu & Sarvani	Butchers, dentists, rheumatist.	Hindus
2.	Sanwats	Banaphar, Rathore family	Butchers, singers	Muslims
3.	Brijbasi	Braj or Mathura family	Acrobatics, rope dancers etc.	Hindus
4.	Bachgoti	Rajput Sect	Wrestling, stick playing etc.	Hindus
5.	Bajaniya	'Baja' family	Dancers (diff. ways)	Hindus
6.	Mahawat	-	Cattle dealers, Folk doctors etc.	Muslims
7.	Bajigar	-	Folk Artists (diff. ways)	Hindus & Muslims

Source: From 'Nat' in Tribes and Castes of North West Provinces by Russel R.V. & Hira Lal, p. 56-67, 1916.

It is very clear that the tribal organisation of the Nats is very complex. Everywhere they merge with the regular vagrant tribes and it is impossible to distinguish between different groups of vagrant tribes. Among all the population of the Nats, it is seen that most of them, near about two thirds are Hindus by religion and the rest are Muslims. Of the Hindus we find ten main sub castes. Following are some of the illustrations of sub-castes.

1. The ***Brijbasi***: The name is derived from the 'Braj' region of Mathura and its neighbourhood. They say that they came to Braj or Mathura after the capture of Chittore which is the starting point of the tradition of so many castes. They practice Hinduism. The main performance is that the men walk on high stilts and the women show their confidence by dancing and singing under them. They eat pork, drink spirits and bury their dead.
2. ***Gual*** or ***Cowherds***-some of whom claim as Jat and others an Ahir origin.
3. ***Jogila*** or the ***Jogis***-connected with the name to be the vagrant criminal Jogis.
4. ***Kabutara***-taking the name from the pigeon kabutar who are prostitutes, called from the characteristic wooing of the birds.
5. ***Kalabaz*** is literally a tumbler or juggler. The Karnatak is supposed to come from the Karnataka country, the Modern Karnatic in Madras or Chennai.
6. The ***Mirdaha***' is literally a village ruler (the Persian word is Mirdah and now-a-days the word is usually applied to a man who carries a chain for a surveyor
7. The ***Rathore***' is the name of a famous Rajput sept, and Sapera (the sanskrit is 'sarpharaka' is literally a snake catcher)

There are many sub-sections found among the Nat community. They practice both religion as Hindus and Muslims. According to ***Carnegy***, on the basis of religion they have been divided as follows:

1. A sub section of the sub-caste of the Sansya is Bhatu or Bhantu, the men of this caste buy cattle for the butchers while the women are cuppers, dentists and the artists. They are Hindus and bury their dead and drink ordinally.
2. ***Sanwat***-They are Muhammadans. They also supply butchers and sing the praises of Alha and Udal, the heroic Banaphar warriors who were afterwards subjected to the Rathore from whom their sub-caste claims descent.
3. ***Brijbasi***-They are Hindus. The men practice rope dancing and acrobating and the women are engaged in dancing and singing.
4. ***Bachgoti***-They are Hindus. This is the Rajput sect of the same name. The men wrestle and play single stick and the women are depraved. They bury their dead.

5. **Bajaniya**- It seems to take their name from 'Baja' that is music accompanying their performances. They are Hindus and dance on tight ropes. They are addicted to drinking. They bury their dead in an upright position.
6. **Beria**-They are Hindus. They do not perform but attend feasts and eat scrapes. The women are depraved and all are addicted to drinking. They bury their dead.
7. **Mahawat**-They are Muslims. They are said to be expert in treating rheumatism and deal in cattle. Drinking is confined to the seniors on the occasions of death.
8. **Bazigar**-They are common conjurers, who are given to drinking. They also bury their dead.

These are the common characteristics of the different sub sections of the Nat Community.

As far as the tribal organisation of the Nats are concerned, Carnegie divides the Oudh Nats into eight sub-castes- First the **Gwaliyari Nats** or those of Gwalior with three sub sections- Kabutari, Bhatu and Sarvani. Among these, the Kapuri appear to take their name from Karpura, means 'camphor', the Bhatu are seemingly the same as the Bhatu or Bhantu a sub-caste of the Sansya. The men of this sub-caste buy cattle for butchers, while the women are cuppers, dentists and artists. They are Hindus and they bury their dead and drink inordinately. Secondly the Sanwals who are the Muhammedans, they also supply butchers and sing the praises of Alha and Udal. Thirdly the Brijbasi who are the Hindus. Fourthly the Bachgoti who are Hindus and Carnegie connected with the Rajput sept of the same name. Fifthly, the Bijaniya or the Bajaniya. Sixthly the Beriya who are Hindus. Seventhly, the Mahawat who are Musalmans by religion. Lastly comes the Bazigar or common conjurers.

According to the survey done during many years ago in Mirzapur the Bajaniya, Byadha, Karnatak, Kashmiri, Kalabaj, Mahawat, Badi and Malar Nats are found. From Shahjahanpur comes a list of Hindu sub-castes including the Bhantu who are Sansyas with the Gual, Ghara, kalabaz, Kabutariya and Lakarbaz or performers on stilts. From Kheri we find the Bhatiya who are perhaps the Bhatu of Shahjahanpur, the Kingariya who are distinct groups, the Kanjar who of course form a tribe of his own, the Gulahla, Kalabaj, Rajnat and Darahti who again are usually classed as a quite different group. The lists from Badaoun gives Gual and Brajbasi with the sections the Kakhera or Kanghigar or comb makers and the Banjara where we meet a distinct group. In Hardoi we find the kalabaj, Karnatak, Brijbasi and Bagula. In Bijnore, the badi, Gual and Keutar, the last of whom are possibly connected with the Kewats. The sub castes of the Muhammedan Nats are much less well established. In Ghazipur we find the Punjabi, Goriya and Hagiya; in Fatehpur, the Meghiya, Dariya, Chhijariya and Krim or Karim.

The census of 1891 notes that there are 386 sections of the Hindus and 205 of the Musalman Nats.

Bajaniya Nats of Mirzapur have seven sub sections which are obviously of totemistic origin. These are '*Makriyana*' which take their name from *makri*, a 'spider' which no member of the section will kill, the Gauharna which are called from *goh* the Gangetic alligator or lizard known as the *goh sanp* which none of them will harm, Deodinaik or 'leader given by God'. The members of this sections are generally headmen known as the 'Chaudhari' of the tribe, Bahunaina or 'the fly' which takes its name from having many eyes, this insect none of them will injure, Gagoliya of which they are unable to give any explanation, Sanpaneriya, none of whom will kill the snake 'sanp' and Sugnaik, none of whom will injure the parrot 'suga'. These sections are exogamous, but there is no other prohibition against intermarriage, and it is notorious that Nats marry very close blood relations. As far as their origin is concerned they say that they were originally residents of Marwar and passed into Mirzapur through Bundelkhand. The migration is said to have occurred about centuries ago. They have no other tribal tradition except that they have been created by the 'Parmeshwar' whose pleasure it was that they should be acrobats and rope-dancers.

These are the seven sub-sections of the Bajaniya Nats of Mirzapur till found today- Makriyana, Gauharna, Deodinaik, Bahunaina, Gagoliya, Sanpaneriya and Sugnaik. On the basis of the traits described above, they have been categorized. As the name suggests on the basis of their traits, they are scattered among different parts of the districts of Mirzapur, Sonebhadra and Sant Ravidas Nagar (Bhadohi). Some of them are settled and the rest of the population are still depending upon the traditional modes of occupation and living a nomadic life.

'Nat is an Intermediate Community'

Nat can be taken as an intermediate community because they follow both religious aspects of Hindus and Muslims. On one hand they follow some aspects of Hindu tribals, on the other hand they also follow the aspects of Muslim tribals. During the long history of survival, they have to opt various disguises and styles in order to live in the society.

Another study here reflects how they are similar to the nomadic Garasia tribals. As is well known, Dave (1960) has written a monograph on the Garasia's. Although he was not a professional anthropologist, he came in contact with this tribe as an administrator and for effective planning as well as to satisfy his intellectual curiosity he studied this tribe for quite a long time. Although what he has written is basically problem oriented and it mainly highlights the ecological problems of the Garasias, one notes with interest the processes which a tribal community like the Garasia have undergone to integrate themselves with the larger national society. This effort on the tribe is reflected in its formulations and modification of legends, acceptance of social and religious practices etc. of the larger society. It is interesting to note

that a section of this tribe claims to be partly Rajput and also partly Hindu by religion from all accounts, it is being referred to as an 'intermediate community' representing a combination of tribal and Hindu styles of life. The study of such an intermediate community has great theoretical significance as it is also seen among the case of the Nat community because they also follow both Hindu and Muslim religion, being traditional in nature.

It is acknowledged that the grading of the tribes on the basis of their economic life and occupation and in accordance with any *approved scheme of classification* is difficult as most of the tribes possess either marginal cultures or follow more than one occupations. At the tribal stage of living it does not provide for any specialisation of functions and a variety of occupations are followed by a tribe. It is known fact that when a tribe takes to one specialised occupation, it behaves as a caste as in the case of Nats of Mirzapur, because many occupations followed by 'Nats' diverging at one point, called as *Nat occupation*.

Some of these nomads, especially *Sansis, Banjaras* and *Doms* may be the survivors of those primitive tribes of hoary past and might have decided to cling on to the life, their forefathers had led preferring this free and unfettered life as intrinsic feature of their culture. But on closer scrutiny, we find that some of those people took to nomadism due to various other reasons and not of their own volition (Singh, 2001).

Bakarwals, Gujjars, Todas, Golas, Gaddis, Rebaris, Idyans and *Kurumbas* are classified as Nomads or seminomads. Some of them have permanent home to which they periodically return after the grazing hours or the period of migration. Besides these nomadic groups, there are groups of people, who have their own homes or land and who periodically return to subsist on their earnings. Their nomadism very often involves moving with the family and belongings to location, where arable lands are available and from where they return later, when harvesting has been completed. Such groups of people are classified as semi-nomadic groups. A few of the nomadic groups are blacksmiths and prepare agricultural implements and other requirements for the settled communities. Gaduliya Lohar is a typical example under this category. Attempts for their rehabilitation were made but little success has been achieved so far.

There are some other nomadic groups like *Nats* and *Kalbeliya-Jogis*. The former show acrobatic and physical feats and also beg food grains. The *Kalbeliya-Jogi* are snake charmer, who move from village to village showing snakes and asking for food grains in return. *Kal* means death and *beliya* means conqueror, this forms one who wins over death known as the 'kalbeliya'. There are various types of sooth sayers, palmists and astrologers among the Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic groups. They are called *Badubudiki, Gondhaliya, Joshi* in Karnatak (Mysore) State. They go about houses predicting the fortunes of people and collecting money, grains, clothing, etc.

Socio-Economic Condition of the 'Nat' Community

The Nats earn their living by gymnastic activities, acrobatic performances, domestication of animals and other activities. According to Vidyarthi, these people have been categorised as "Folk Artist" due to their traditional skills and abilities and economically dependent on their art. (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1977) Nat people often practise surgery and physic in a small way. They earn their bread by adopting their socio-cultural practices that has been learnt from long generations ago. It also affects their health condition. Their socio-cultural practices play a major role in the socio-economic development of the community. Certain traditional beliefs and practices are associated with their socio-cultural occupations. These contribute in a major way in diagnosing the diseases prevalent among them.

Since time immemorial as they are related to '*Fakiri tradition*', they are found as beggars at some places and earn their living by begging, and crimes as thievery, pilfering and dacoity became part and parcel of their life. Some among them are also cultivators (Singh, 1971). Although the Government has allotted *patta* lands for their settlement in every state putting them under the constitutional provision, the other nomadic communities are still facing various social problems as education, shelter, health etc.

Their socio-economic practices generate self-employment in their traditional socio-cultural occupations as well as ethno-medical profession. Socio-cultural occupations include various professions like Fakiri and they sometimes perform gymnastic activities around a gathering of the people. They have expertise in catching the different poisonous snakes and perform shows of snakes and other reptiles. They are snake charmers most often called as Saperas. In short, we can say that their acrobatic performances, gymnastic activities, wrestling skills and other related activities are very much related to their economy. Besides, they are also grass-cutters and beggars as usually seen in Mirzapur District in large numbers. They are somewhat also related to health and hygienic practices for money purposes. Some of their women are dentists among the community and outside of it.

In the book, *Races and Cultures of India* Majumdar (1961) has given brief introduction about the Nat community of Mirzapur as well as Uttar Pradesh. What is their condition, what do they do to keep alive and what are their beliefs and traditions and healing cultures that much appeals to them and with the help of all these activities, they perform their work well. He notes, "The economic life of a tribe cannot be described as a simple stage either of direct appropriation or one of more accidental collectors. The fact that a tribe uses all kinds of occupations to eke out its subsistence and combines hunting with honey gathering, lumbering with the chase and shifting cultivation with domestication of animals show the complexity of economic subsistence in the lower culture" (Majumdar, 1961:127)

The different socio-cultural occupations of the Nats in the community such as Fakiri or begging, acrobatics, musicians and of their women such as grass cutting,

traditional healers and dentists, tattooing and honey collection shows their traditional style of living impacted upon their socio-cultural pattern of life. Among the older generation, a number of persons are following the same traditional occupation but there is no doubt a change among the younger generation. The young persons are able to take up carpet weaving as their own occupation. For this, they take loans from the carpet *maliks* and make a contract working on carpet in one month they prepare carpet and take the full money as the service charge from the carpet *malik* on daily wage. In this period of rapid economic change and liberalisation people belonging to this community are still engaged in occupations as Saperas, Fakirs, Acrobats, Gymnasts and Bazigars as identified as '*Folk Artists*'.

In Uttar Pradesh, due to religious influence they have been divided between Muslims and Hindus. According to a recent High Court judgement the Muslim Banjaras are not backwards, and the Court referred that the word '*banjara*' is always found in Hindu versions and scripts. Nats who are identifying themselves as Muslims have been placed in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and the Hindu Nats under the scheduled Caste category according to the recent court decision.

A sizeable population of Nats living in Azamgarh district and are conscious of their rights are demanding Governmental facilities and lands for their settlement and habitation. According to the report published in a Hindi Daily *Dainik Jagaran* the regional president of Nat association Mohd. Islam has denied the distinction of Nats on the basis of two religions and has said that the Nats are equal in their occupations, whether they call themselves as Hindus or Muslims. The irony is that due to the negligence of the government officers they are still living in the same condition and the overall community is facing backwardness in the field of education and progress. He demanded further schemes for the development of such communities (Ref. '*Nat biradari khanabadosh jivan jino ko majboor i.e. ('Nat community' still surviving on its nomadic path*' published on 25th October 1998 in *Dainik Jagran*).

Another Nat meeting was also held in the same district under the influence of Samajvadi Party and *Nat Samaj Vikash Samiti, Uttar Pradesh*. They represented to the government that while several rural development schemes are prevalent they are out of reach of the Nat people. They alleged that they are not benefitting properly due to the avoidance of the bureaucracy on account of Nats' ignorance and backwardness (*Hindustan* under the topic '*Sarkari upechha ke chalte samaj pichara*' i.e. (*Backwardness of the Nat society due to Government avoidance*) on 15th March 2001).

Occupational Pattern of the Nat Community

The occupational pattern of any community depends upon the nature of the community and the professions engaged in by the community members. It is often on that basis only that the name of the community is derived. The term based on

several similar occupations later on converted as a caste. The reason is that by doing the similar kinds of occupation including art, dancing, acrobating etc. followed by the various castes and later on those people congregated adjoining themselves to a Nat caste origin.

TABLE 2: THE RELATION BETWEEN THE TWO KINDS OF OCCUPATION FOUND AMONG THE 'NATS OF MIRZAPUR

<i>Socio cultural occupation Socio-Cultural Life Style</i>	<i>Ethno -medical occupation Primitive Cure Style</i>
Fakiri, Begging, acrobatic performance, wrestling etc. (Gymnastic activities) Saperas (Snake Charmer), domesticate poisonous reptiles, collect honey and forest produce as natural herbs and roots, etc. Musician (singing and dancing)	Traditional-healer, traditional surgeon, Ojha, Jhar-phookwala Tattooing, dentist, bone setter Cure by jadu, tona-totka, tantra-mantra & tabeez etc.

Source: Data taken from fieldwork (1998-2003)

The socio-cultural occupations are related to their nomadic style of living and Nats perform a variety of occupations. This can be grouped as those relating to their socio-cultural life style and those relating to ethno-medical practices. Lack of education among the Nats and the impact of urbanisation have helped maintain their socio-cultural occupations still now despite the lack of any governmental support.

Medical occupations practised by them are widely accepted even today by the community members of the Nats and others. Ethno-medicine among the Nats is still popular, although some especially those who are better off economically opt for allopathic cure in modern medical system. Nat medical men or the community doctors cure diseases by mantra and tantra also. The person who is referred as the doctor is Fakir or Ojha among the community. There are women healers also in the community, the women healers play very active roles in the diagnosis of certain diseases relating to arthritis and psychic ailments.

The main occupations of the Nat community have been listed as under.

(A) Socio-cultural/ traditional/ Primary/ main occupation of the Nat Community

1. Fakir or Beggar (ethno-medical)
2. Saperas or the Snake charmer
3. Acrobat or Gymnast
4. Singer and Dancer
5. Honey collection
6. Tattooer

7. Traditional healer (ethnomedical)

(B) Secondary occupation of the Nat community

1. Grass cutter
2. Rickshaw-puller
3. Bangle seller
4. Buffaloe domestication or Pastoralist
5. Tattooer and Dentist (ethnomedical)
6. Semi-skilled worker or carpet worker (non-traditional)

Some of the traditional professions of the Nats which are still very popular are as follows-

Nat Shows

In the state of Uttar Pradesh, it is seen that the Nats move from one place to another to perform their shows of acrobatic performance and dancing and singing. Their shows last for 15 minutes to an hour before a local gathering. They move from place to place and from village to village along with their company including their children and women. During my fieldwork in Mirzapur district I found that they work in a group of two to seven persons, may be young men or women in the age group of 15 -25, or grown-up persons in the age group of 40-50 as the case may be. At the start of the show generally a drum beater attracts and collects a gathering, erects the rope and trapezes and the base. There is a dance to a local tune consisting of rope dancing or acrobating at times with iron rings and daggers. Sometimes they show balancing feats and play with fierce flames and so on. It is very interesting during these shows to observe some of the imitating Nat children of two or four years of age during the shows. It denotes the proper training of a Nat child under the particular skill developing system. The children are socialised under the same system to become a born artist without any formal training as education, learning etc. Since their early childhood by such training they adopt such attributes and styles to perform in an interesting way before public for organizing lively shows. As the show draws to an end one fellow Nat goes around collecting *inam* of money or cereals, and then the show comes to an end with the most common wording '*khel khatam paisa hazam*' (the play is over, the money gone)

Snake Charmer

A sub-section of the Nats are snake charmers. The 'Rathore' is the name of the famous Rajput sect of the Nat community that acts as the snake charmer. It is popularly known as the Sapera (Sanskrit, sarpharaka) literally a snake catcher. One section of the Bajaniya Nats of Mirzapur is known as the '*Sanpneriya*'. This is an occupational name for a Nat who is expert in snake charming activities. The

characteristics of this section is that none of them kills the snake (sanp). In this way he is an expert to catch the different varieties of the snakes. On the eve of Dussehra, Dipawali and Mahashivaratri, the Nat 'Sapera' walks from door to door and show the snakes like black cobra and green snakes, leopard and Takshak. They organise the shows of various snakes and other reptiles and they depict them as Nagbaba, the incarnation of Lord Shiva most popular God among the Hindus. Since the early childhood they are expert in catching the different poisonous snakes and they use them as the necessary items for their profession. Sometimes the 'Sapera community' is totally distinct from the Nat community because they trace their ancestorship from the Nath sect as Adinath, Gorakhnath who were the most profound figures among that community.

Sometimes on the marriage occasion, they are also acting as the professional musician and they earn money by creating melodious songs through their hollow gourd just called in local term '*been*' (that is a kind of musical trumpet made by hollow gourd stripped with various coins). Nowadays they also use standing harmonium and other instruments for this purpose. In a marriage party they are specially called for this purpose among the low class people near the settlement area. Domestication of snakes is a particular kind of profession mostly popular among them. They also perform various types of gymnastic activities. On the Nag Panchami and Dussehra festivals of the Hindus the snake charmers wander from one place to another with baskets full of snakes for making shows. They keep a hollow gourd into which they produce a kind of special music known as the '*Nagin Dhun*' (a particular kind of musical tone taken from the much popular film 'Nagin' that is very appealing among the audience) and it is supposed to charm the snakes. Whenever they migrate from one place to another place they sometimes practise shamanism. While going towards the market they perform various types of magico-religious practices as jadu-tona and totka for the welfare of the people. In turn they get some money from the pockets of rich men. All these activities are found among the Nats of Arjunpur, Hariharpur, Bharehta and Gorasar settlements of different blocks of Mirzapur district.

Tattooing: A Symbol of Aesthetics and Art

In certain parts of the world tattooing is practised as a symbol of art and aesthetics. As the time changes it is also practised as the skin deep art in many parts of the world. In the old days the piercing was the sign of the courage, now it is merely a fashion. In the same way body painting is also popular with the tribals. India is a place where body art has always been prominent as the example of *Mehandi* (Henna) that has been used from generations ago. The great part with it is that one can experiment with new designs. With some innovations and abstract designs it has become a fashion movement. In fact a lot of designers are using it as an accessory and preferring it over jewellery. It is very simple to use in various designs. This is

again gaining acceptance in the world of art as well. Body landscaping is an inspiration for people to express themselves better. Body painting can be done on the face, arms, fingers, ankles, thighs, navel, wrists, shoulders, back and basically wherever you want it. These designs are temporary. On the other hand, tattooing is painful, once it is done it does not hurt much. Therefore, it is clear that other forms of tattooing are also related with the symbol of aesthetics and medicine. It is also prevalent among the tribal women as a 'totka' to prevent various types of diseases.

There are certain women among the Nat community who act as the tattooers not only for the community members but for others as well. These women belong to the *Badi* or *Malar* tribes of the community. They act as the tattooers and cure different types of diseases as arthritis, *batash* and muscular pain. For this they inscribe different types of tattoo marks by piercing needle into the various parts of the body using herbal plant juice, *charcoal* powder and *salai* tree powder. Some Nat women in the age group of (30-66) known as the '*Badnin*' practise tattooing during the month of *Shravan* (Aug-Sept) with great zeal. The elderly Nat women are very much involved in the profession of tattooing. They visit from village to village, cities and other places to perform it. On such days tattooing is in great demand by the rural women.

Issues of Marginalisation of Nats

A history of exploitation during the Mughal and British period tells a lot about their history, full of sorrows and tears. In colonial times, the British declared them as Criminal Tribes. More than 153 ethnic communities have earlier been placed under the Criminal Tribes Act by the British Government in 1871. They were declared as born-criminals by the British. According to 1941 Census Report there were 166845 members of so-called criminal tribes in Uttar Pradesh alone, of which 29839 were registered as criminals in Uttar Pradesh. But even in the present times they are still marginalised and disadvantaged. In 1952 the Government of India revoked the Criminal Tribes Act but for the 153 notified groups the unmerited stigma of criminality had ensured their subhuman standard of living. It is a matter of great concern because after India got freedom they have not been settled completely and the social welfare schemes have not facilitated much in order to uplift their socio-economic conditions. Although they are culturally very rich, due to availability of electronic media such as the TV, and other means of recreations the public is not anymore inclined to see their acrobatic shows or other dancing and music performances. One particular reason for not developing the folk traditional arts is that there is not sufficient fund allocation for modernising such skills and performances that are learnt informally from one generation to another among such communities who are gifted artists depending upon their traditional style of living as *sapera*, *dancer*, *acrobats* and *musicians*, etc.

According to Fuchs (1973) the specific feature of all nomadic people is their common pattern of economy and life characterized by the one sided exclusive emphasis of their economy upon the keeping and breeding of the herd animals, to the almost complete absence of every kind of agriculture, and by their unsteady, migrant way of life without any stable and permanently inhabited settlements in direct contrast to the settled cultivators. This can also be seen in the case of the Nats of Mirzapur because they keep herd animals like buffaloes, goats and hens. They domesticate such animals and take milk and meat from it. They are engaged in selling and purchasing of buffaloes at a certain market price. The common economic basis, the uniform way of life resulting from it and the many similarities which can be observed in the customs and ways concerning animal husbandry cannot however obscure the extraordinarily great differences of cultural patterns between those nomadic tribes which still exist today.

Consequently nomadic people are commonly exposed to some specific health needs which are of particular importance with regard to infectious diseases. On the other hand, although nomadic people are exposed to considerable risks from infectious diseases, they also know various types of herbal plants and roots to cure various diseases, some of which could easily be deduced with their help. That is why it is assumed that they have been suffering from a number of communicable diseases through their routes of travel. Their socio-cultural tradition are also different from other communities. Their level of acculturation, their notion of disease pattern and methods of treatment are likely to be different from other tribal communities. Therefore it is necessary for health planners and policymakers to take cognisance of it. The results obtained through systematic study of the healthcare concepts of different tribal communities will be helpful for the planners and policymakers to formulate suitable health plans for the community as well as for the nation.

How the economic liberalisation affects the social infrastructure of the family of the Nats is given below. In some joint families, in all settlements of the Nat households common hearths are still used for the preparation of the meal, but in extended families it was found that several nuclear families live together and have separate hearths. The Head of the household is not dependent upon the members of the family until or unless he becomes sick or unable to do his job. The main function of the head of the household is fakiri, herbalist, and other work as domestication of buffaloes. In the young generation, one member of the family is sometimes semiskilled worker or rickshaw puller. In nuclear family, the head of the household is the main earning member. He lives with his wife and offspring and sometimes relatives but it is not often necessary. The households formed is the basic unit of the study and all the Nat households in the selected settlements formed the entire universe of the study. As is evident from the study, the Nats are a migrated community and in the contemporary times are still showing the nomadic behaviour

if not in a complete sense but in the form of seasonal migration. According to the special provision of the state government *patta* land had been allotted for the settlements of such type of community people as Nats and Kanjar and other Denotified and Nomadic Tribal Groups in all parts of Uttar Pradesh before 1978. One *Dera* consists of a number of families extended or jointly knit together. But the irony is that they are more or less depending upon their nomadic style of functioning in search of their livelihood.

In this way, they make money by doing various kinds of professions moving from one place to another. While on their travels, they are able to fulfill certain of their needs such as physical needs (food, sex and shelter), economic needs (occupation and money), and integrative needs (religion and law). Sometimes they go to earn or begging or settling marital alliances for their sons and daughters. In this manner, they fulfill their physical needs. Most often, they go to make shows or to hold '*majma*' for a certain period outside the community. This period also gives a chance to them to sort out issues in traditional Panchayat. Many Nats who are '*Chaudhary*', head of the traditional Panchayat of the community, are invited by their kin relatives to solve the disputes among the members of the community. Festivities such as initiation rites and rituals related to death and marriage are the best occasions that make them to lead the nomadic way of life. In this way, they complete all their needs as described by Malinowski's theory of needs. After spending some period of nomadic life during the period of seasonal migration, they come back to their settlements and live according to their manner. It is the common characteristic feature of a Nat life.

It holds good in the case of Nats of Mirzapur as well. The poor and marginal sections of the communities suffer not only from lack of money but also from the liability of a *culture of poverty*. This culture of poverty is a set of sub-cultural responses specific to that community formed in reaction to their marginal position in society. This enables them to get into the world not of their making. The poor develop a unique set of norms and values. Implicit in the culture of poverty is the belief that the poor have value systems different from those of the middle classes and that this isolates them from the rest of the members of the society. These values vary from culture to culture and between communities. In some they emphasize short range gratification over long range goals, thus enabling the poor to develop certain coping strategies (Valentine, 1968). In India, the Hindu belief in *karma* has made 'resignation to fate' an accepted cultural value.

Characteristics of *culture of poverty* developed in other socio-cultural contexts may not be particularly relevant to study the culture of poverty of marginalized communities in North-central India. But it may be worth exploring how the poor in different communities here attempt to carry out mainstream cultural goals within the severe limitations of a poverty environment. Such an exploration is relevant for the Nats of Mirzapur. For instance, domestic violence is prevalent in the community

if the person does not go outside to earn in any way such as *fakiri* or daily wage worker etc. These sub-cultural responses indicate the culture of poverty among the community. The culture of poverty syndrome may not be universally applicable for every section of poor but in some cases it does hold good to judge the sub-cultural responses of a particular impoverished community (Upadhyaya, 2004).

Conclusion

The 'Nats' of Mirzapur are in the south-eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. Presently there are many tribal communities in the country that are nomadic in nature who suffer effective isolation from the mainstream of the country. Their isolated life prevents them from exploiting many of the advantages of modern development. On many occasions they are found rejecting the programmes of modernization implemented by the governmental and voluntary agencies due to the fact that the programmes of development do not fit in with the nature and habitation of the community members. They are still dependent upon their own medical practices when contracted by diseases. The ingredients of their medicines include some herbs, animal derivatives and much popular jadu, tona, totka, tantra mantra, desicures and naturopathy based on their socio-cultural adaptations. They have certain age-old techniques and administration of medicines for different diseases. Indigenous health experts as Fakir, Ojha and Jhar-Phookwala act as the community doctor forming an integral component of treatment procedure. Among the medical experts Fakir and Jharphookwala belong to the Nat community and Ojha belongs to other neighbouring community as chamar or kumhar. It denotes the medical pattern of the community in which various elements of ethno-medicine³ are interwoven as a whole to form within an institutional set up of the Nat community. This particular medical system based on their ethno-medical conception of the diseases helps the nomads to check the diseases in a satisfying manner within the culture of the community.

Most of the nomadic communities are very backward with little social and material development and are living in isolated or remote areas where modern health facilities are not available. In present times, they are less settled and they have not given up their nomadic style of living or functioning till now. The reason is that they obtain their subsistence pattern through the process of nomadism, seasonal migration or wandering from one place to another. Although it has been noticed that a significant number of them are settled on land provided by the state Government for their habitation, they have not gotten fully rid of nomadic style of functioning till now because the state has no proper policy to rehabilitate and develop such socio-cultural communities. It is due to the fact that they acquire no lands for agriculture uses, in most cases. Initially, their economy is largely derived by traditional occupations continued through long generations. Although factors of change such as industrialisation, westernisation, modernisation and

information technology impact all sectors of development and progress of society, they are less prone to achieve education and modern techniques to produce optimum skills for progress. They have engaged in secondary occupations as carpet worker, semi skilled labourer, mine worker, stone or brick maker and expert in making of different earthly items as the religious idols, deities, pots etc. from soil, concretes and other ingredients, because of the fact that there is not much scope left to display their socio-cultural shows as rope-dancing, entering through inflammatory fire, snake charming, acrobatic scenes etc. before the public, but they continue it through the passage of nomadism in their own style.

During the field work done in Mirzapur district in various settlements of the Nat communities it was observed that the central assistance scheme such as old age Pension scheme, Indira Awas Yojana, Jawahar Rojgar Yojana, Tribal Rural Youth Self Employment Programmes etc. have not fulfilled their socio-economic needs satisfactorily. Developmental interventions and government planning and programmes by the state have not facilitated their better living condition due to certain reasons. Firstly, most of the community men are illiterates. They are ignorant and unaware of the government welfare schemes. Secondly, they are engaged in their socio-cultural occupations and thirdly, the programmes of the government have not been conceived keeping in view the socio-cultural framework of the ethnic communities in India. Similarly the initiatives taken by the state in the areas of Reproductive health and family planning programme have shown no impact on bringing down their fertility rates. The impact of various integrated rural development programmes and social assistance schemes have also not improved the living standard of the Nats.

The fact is that the tribal groups are caught between apathy and neglect by the government on the one hand and the exploitation and invasion by traders and contractors on the other. This situation caused an indiscriminate exposure of tribal life to alien factors which led to their socio-cultural as well as ecological-economic degradation. Many tribal cultures and social systems collapsed under this pressure and sometimes it has been observed that the whole communities entered into a life of bonded labour. The social change among tribes over the last several decades is not really a systematic and coherent one. Rather, it is haphazard and imbalanced change where the core of tribal culture, its religion, marriage, kinship etc. have remained largely unchanged, while the more peripheral aspects like clothing, housing structure, food and drinking habits, hygienic habits etc. have undergone a substantial change. Such a lopsided development leading to the distortion of regional cultural configuration without facilitating an alternative design of life has its reflections in different aspects of present day tribal scenario.

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