

Importance of Bamboos in Meche Community of Nepal

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ABSTRACT: Meche community is one of the Adibasi/Janjati ethnic groups of Nepal, they live in Jhapa district of eastern Tarai in Nepal. The Jhapa district is the homeland for about 99 castes and ethnic groups of Nepal including Santal, Rajbanshi, Dhimal, Gangai, Tajpuria, Kissan, Majhim Munda, Meche, etc. Meches are medium sized, straightforward people with sharp eyes, flat nose, sparse facial hair, thick hair, thick lips, round face and dark complexion. Bamboo plays an important role to sustain the rural economy of Nepal. Bamboos are equally preferable to all castes and ethnic communities of Nepal including Meche community. The Meche community has low economic status and is very much dependent on the bamboo plants for their subsistence. The bamboos grow rapidly and useful for building houses, roofs, fences, baskets and many domestic items whenever needed.

INTRODUCTION

Meche Community

Meche community is one of the Adibasi/Janjati ethnic groups of Nepal who live in Jhapa district of Mechi zone in eastern Tarai. They are mainly distributed in 20 Village Development Committees and two municipalities of Jhapa district. In addition, a few population groups of them live in Sunsari, Morang and Saptari district (Machhari, 2060, BS) (BS: *Bikram Sambat* – Nepali calendar nearly 57 years earlier than Roman calendar). Jhapa district is located between 26° 20' to 26° 51' latitude and 87° 39' to 88° 12' longitude. The district has an area of 16.6 sq km with a length of 46 km and width of 9 km. Jhapa is the homeland for 99 castes and ethnic groups including Santal, Rajbanshi, Dhimal, Gangai, Tajpuria, Kishan, Majhi, Munda, Meche, etc. The district is demarcated

to the eastern side by the boarder of India (West Bengal) along with Mechi River, on western side by Morang district, whereas on the northern side it is demarcated by Ilam district, and on southern side by Bihar state of India.

The Meches are medium sized and strong people with sharp eyes, flat nose, sparse facial hair, thick hair, thick lips, round face and dark complexion. They are simple, straight forward and hardworking people. The early British scholar like Hodgson (1880) describes that Meches came from Morang (Nepal), a country of Kichoks in Nepal. Campbell (1839) wrote the Meche's habitat was spread from Brahma Putra River in Assam up to the Kankai River in Nepal. Meches have referred their ancestral root from Kirat Hangba's son Thang Dava's (Diwas, 2039 BS). The Meches and Kirats belong to Asura dynasty (Diwas, 2039 BS). Meches are abbreviated into Mech (Sanyal, '73). Grierson ('03) mentioned that the Meche is a corruption of Mlechhas (*cf.* Sanyal, '73). The Bodos of Jalpaiguri and Tarai calls themselves as Mech

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because they have settled on the bank of the river Mechi. Hamilton ('71) mentioned that the eastern part of Bijayapur kingdom was occupied by a notable number of Meche settlers.

Until a few decades ago, the Meches spent a nomadic life and after the gradual deforestation of Tarai, they started to settle permanently. The total population of Meche in Nepal is 4867, among them 1834 are males and 1933 are females (CBS, 2012). Meche calls *ari* for clan, which is a family name. There are thirteen family names according to social work related responsibilities but only five main clans are found in Nepal now. They are Basumatari, Narzinari, Mochhari, Hajyoari and Sarnpramari (Meche, 2068 BS). According to Sharma (2051/2052 BS), after marrying a Meche girl the then Rana, Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana gave away some land as a Birta — the royal gift to her father in north eastern part of Jhapa. The place was popularly known as Rani Birta. They considered that the place is located in the Birtamod bazar. The Meche people are very close to forest resources including bamboo plant for their livelihood. The use of bamboos are equally preferable to all of castes and ethnic communities of Nepal but the poor people like Meche community are very much dependent on this plant (Amatya, 2000).

BAMBOO PLANT

Bamboos (Subfamily *Bambusoideae*) are considered as an important natural resource of the world since prehistoric days and are integrated to the culture of people mainly in South East Asia, where 80 per cent of bamboos are distributed from tropical to temperate regions, mostly along the abandoned hill slopes and grooves near settlements and margins of farmlands (*cf.* Giri and Regmi, 2002). Bamboos play very important role in the rural economy of developing countries like Nepal. Bamboos are one of the most important minor forest produce which provide food, raw material and shelters and are used in various socio-cultural rites of different communities. Bamboos also purify polluted air by releasing oxygen in nature, and also help in protecting soil erosion of river bank through large scale plantation of bamboos.

The bamboos are considered as one of the most indispensable plants in Nepalese society from birth to death. There is a mythology story in *Mahabharata*

that bamboos were created by Pandavas when they came to Bijayapur during their *Guptabhas* period (Giri and Regmi, 2002). Botanists' consider that bamboos are most preferable and valuable group of plants due to their easy and fast growing nature, flexibility, and straight form, and being light to handle. Botanists' classifies the bamboos in the Family Poaceae (Subfamily Bambusoideae of the grass Family Poaceae). There are about 1573 species of woody bamboos all over the world (INBAR, 2000). Nepal houses over 32 species under 11 genera (Stapleton, 1994). Several kind of uses and services of bamboo plants are reported ranging from livelihood, food, biomass production, house construction, pulp and paper industry, fodder, soil erosion control, purification of polluted air, absorption of chemicals, isolation of phytostorels, in religious and aesthetic values, etc (Giri and Regmi, 2002). The common species of bamboos used by Meches are Mugi bans (*Bambusa alami*) Ban/Dhnu bans (*Bambusa balcooa*), Mal bans (*Bambusa nutans*), Dhungre/Rashhasi bans (*Dendrocalamus giganteus*), Choya/Tama bans (*Dendrocalams hamiltonii*), etc. Many households in Tarai consider bamboo as an important source of income hence the demand for bamboos are increasing. Many of the bamboo species produce edible shoots which are used as vegetable in many parts of Nepal (Das, '98).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was used to collect data. Data collection tool was used as observation (participant and non-participant), face to face interview and group discussion as a primary source of data collection, and also used some related literature as a secondary source of information. Information were collected during 2013 to 2015 from the Meche community of Dhajjan Village Development Committee and Jalthat Village Development Committee of Jhapa district. Most of the information were collected from the knowledgeable persons, village headman (*Makhal*) Meche elders, elites, political leaders, and school teachers of Meche community.

DISCUSSIONS

Meche community of Nepal use bamboos for their socio-economic and cultural activities. They

prefer the bamboo plant because it is sturdy and flexible, and can be used in preparing many things easily, and further it is easy to plantation and grows quickly. The various uses of bamboos by Meche community are discussed below.

Livelihood value: Bamboos are commonly used for household construction as in walling, thatching and roofing of huts, making grain storage baskets (*bhakarīs*), walking sticks, handicrafts, tool handles, furniture, fencing materials, etc. The other uses of bamboos by Meches are making fishing rod, fishing traps, cages for poultry, pipes for water supply and irrigation, bullock carts, ladders and windows. Bamboos are also being used for making sheds for cows, buffalos, goat and pigs and other domestic animals.

Food value: Bamboo like 'Tama bans' produces edible young shoots which is very popular among the people of Nepal. Bamboo shoots are very nutritious vegetable. Meches also use young bamboo shoots for vegetables.

House construction: Bamboos are widely used for low cost housing in every community of Nepal. Bamboos play a significant role in construction of houses for poor community like Meches. As they cannot afford cemented houses, so they make their houses with bamboos and small sheds for kitchen, store house for grain, small house/sheds for keeping goats, cows, and poultry. They make houses by bamboos for their own stay and then do plastering with clay. The leaves of bamboos are used for fodder for animals, particularly in winter season. In each and every Meche family bamboos are planted in the land owned by them for their domestic use and also get money from the sale of the bamboos grown in their land. If the family has not enough land for bamboo plantation, in that case they purchase bamboos from market for their personal use.

Religious use: Bamboos are used in many religious ritual occasions in Nepal. The uses of bamboos in various religious rites of the Meche community are as follows.

Bathau Than (Temple Like Holy Place): In each and every Meche's house, a Sijo plant (*Euphorbia royleana*) is planted as a symbol of lord Shiva and a temple like holy place is constructed at that place in their courtyard using bamboo plant, and the structure

is called as *Bathau Than*. The *Bathau Than* is surrounded by five layers of bamboo stick fences and the center of bamboo stick fences is filled with clay soil where a small Sijo plant (*Euphorbia royleana*) is planted. The Meche people believe that the *Bathau* was originated at the same time when Meche community was evolved in the earth and since then they worship the *Bathau Than* every day.

Naibanocha Jokhla: This is a kind of ladder built by bamboo plant, in one side of *Bathau Than*, they believed that the lord Shiva climbs at the center of *Bathau Than* through this ladder.

Nomano Than: A small hut called *Nomano Than* is built at the northern side of their main house is built which is roofed with bamboo sticks, they believed that the *Nomano Than* is for Goddess Parvati.

Hunting and fishing instruments: They also use bamboos for making hunting and fishing instruments which are considered as an important part of Meches economy, cultural identity and a symbol of strength and courage. Some of the instruments made by bamboos are as follows:

Jilimbala (bow and arrow): Jilimbala is a hunting instrument or weapon which is associated with their nomadic life. A bow is made from high quality bamboo, by using a piece of bamboo of about 5' or more, which is cleaned by a sharp knife and tied two side with a string similarly, a shaper stick (arrow) is made from bamboo with a small piece of iron in one top of the stick. The bow and arrow (*Jilimbala*) are the most important part of Meche culture. It is used for hunting wild animals for meat and also showing their bravery.

Khoga: This is a fishing tool which is made from bamboo sticks and threads. They put the *Khoga* at the mouth of flowing stream to catch fish. As the fishes flow along water they get entered in the *Khoga* and cannot escaped out of it.

Burung: This is another type fishing tool which is weaved using bamboo threads with a wide opening. It is also placed spreading in the stream of water at the path of fish so that fish enters in the *Burung* automatically and cannot come out of it.

Vati: It is a kind of small basket made of bamboo which is usually tied at the waist of Meche people while they are fishing.

Khowai/Furlung: This is a type of bamboo basket which is used for keeping fish and it is carried on their back while fishing.

Khocha (tir-vala): This is a fishing instrument made from bamboo sticks with a sharp iron piece at one side. It is used to strike on fish on the stream. Nowadays, they also use electric current for fishing instead of *Khocha*.

Lafi (net): This is a type of fishing net made with bamboo strips and rope. The size of fishing net is about two square feet and which is used for fishing during monsoon season. *Lafi* is used for trapping fish especially in stagnant water of low depth stream.

Musical instrument: Meches have unique types of bamboo made musical instruments. The following instruments are used in various social functions.

Chiprung (flute): Meches are very much fond of playing flute made from bamboo, they call it *Chiprung*, which is used in many music, songs, and religious festivals and ceremonies. The flute is made from a small round bamboo pipe which is played by mouth and using fingers in the wholes. The flute of Mechehas only have five holes on it and requires special skill to make this instrument.

Bakhralto: This is a special type of musical instrument, which can be seen only in Meches house. In Meche language 'Ba' means bamboo and a musical instrument made from bamboo is *Bakhralto*. This is made from two or four feet long bamboo strip, it is made by slicing the middle part of strip and plays like *Jhalyali Baja*.

Dautara: A musical instrument made from bamboo pieces and is like *Khapata*.

Domestic instruments: Many domestic instruments are also made from bamboo and are used in various domestic purposes..

Changrang (nanglo): A round tray is made from bamboo strips for winnowing rice and other grains.

Cattle byre: The Cattle byre is thatched with bamboo stick fences.

Bed stead: Meche makes bed stead with bamboo and rope called *Machang*.

Chandrai (small filter): A small filtering instrument made from bamboo.

Jangkhai (big filter): A big size filtering instrument made from bamboo.

Don (dhaki or dali): A small size round basket made from bamboo which is used as container for rice, millet, etc.

Khada (tokari or basket): A round bamboo basket used as a container for fruits or vegetable.

Rekha (kharpon): A big bamboo basket used by farming person for storage of vegetable and fruits.

Janya (rice beer filter): A type of bamboo filter used in making rice beer.

Khardailo (soda filter): A type of filter used for soda.

Raso: A type of bamboo stick for cloth weaving machine.

Shorkhi: A bamboo machine used for making thread.

Gishib (pankha): A hand fan made from bamboo used by hand for fanning and cooling in summer.

Kaiyo: A kind of comb with teeth on both side made from bamboo.

Choi: A kind of hat used by Meches made from bamboo.

Chirin: Bamboo mat used for sitting in the court yard for sunbathing.

Ritualistic use of bamboos during birth and death: When marriage is performed in Meche house they bring the new bride in the *Nomano* house (religious hut made from bamboo and mud) to bow on the feet of God *Mainow* (Parbati), only thereafter she enters in the main house. In their opinion, if a pregnant women get labour pain the family members bring her in *Nomano* house for her easy delivery.

When a child born in Meche community, the umbilical cord is cut by a thin strip of bamboo piece which function as a blade. If the baby is a girl then they use seven (7) slices of bamboo and if the baby is a boy then they use only five (5) slices of bamboo for cutting the cord. The first rice feeding ceremony (*Pasni*) in Meche community takes place when the child reaches the age of six months or more. During *Pasni* the *Roja* (Meche priest) chants mantras and performs some rites in front of *Nomano* house. The feeding ceremony of baby takes place at the *Bathau Than* (a sacred site for Lord Shiva which is made with *Euphorbia* plant having five layers of bamboo trellis and soil), and during the ceremony the head of baby bows at that *than* and then the feeding is started by the maternal uncle or the head of the family. In the Meche house they make small *Jholungo* with bamboo strips and rope for sleeping the small baby. They also build a swing with bamboo and rope in their courtyard for the small children for playing.

When Meche boy/girl indulges in any physical relationship with in the same clan or with a person

which is tabooed, then the community members punish the girl and the boy by keeping them in the bamboo made pig stay (*Khor*) and give them pig food for eating as a punishment for such indulgence.

During arrange marriage, after accepting the proposal of marriage negotiator (*Lami*) they observe the betel nut breaking ceremony (*Goya Khabonaya*) where bamboo is necessary. During this ceremony, the groom's party arranges two kilogram rice, two betel nut coloured with turmeric powder, two pieces of betel leaf, one rupee coin bonded in a banana leaf and puts in to a thin bamboo basket (*Perungo*) at one side of a bamboo pole and a big earthen pot of rice beer (*Jou* or *Jad*) is put on the other side and make a knot by five slices of bamboo pieces. In this way they have to make two balance loader for a gift named '*Ban niwan*' ceremony. The knot of bamboo slice must be in right position. If the bamboo slice knots are in wrong position then they have to pay fine. At the time of marriage two persons play the flute (*Chhiprung*). When the marriage ceremony is over then the bride has to bow at *Nomano* house and then at *Bathau Than*, and the flute playing remains continuing. After this the bride and groom are put at the verandah of *Nomano* house in their traditional dress facing towards the southern side. The father of bride gives some gifts to bride firstly then all relatives give gift turn by turn by wishing/blessing a happy life amidst the ceremonial music played through bamboo flute.

The Meche community use bamboos (*mala-bans*) to carry the dead body of a person, so they let the '*mala-bans*' to grow in the court yard and use them as bamboo poles during such needs. During the death ceremony the Meche community use long green bamboo poles fixing them north-south direction. A bier (*Gothi*) is made from bamboo poles and sticks. If the dead person is male then they use five sticks of bamboo and if the dead person is female then they use seven sticks of bamboo. The bamboos are tied with jute ropes, and five or seven sticks are tied with ropes for keeping the dead person's head towards south and feet to the north side. At the time of cremation of the dead body they put a water vessel made from bamboo pole with water towards head of dead body, and also place a long bamboo stick near the nose outside for symbolizing easy breathing. This is a symbolic ritual performance.

In the cremation ground they put four bamboo poles at the four corners then a tripod is made from bamboo with one or one and half feet height for offering some food on an earthen pot by making hole on one side. They offer food on this bamboo tripod for the dead body and his bodyguard on the last day of death pollution they again go the cremated ground by preparing all types of food. They put the food in a small bamboo basket and a vessel of rice beer on each side of a bamboo pole loader. It is carried by the dead person's son (*kiriya putri*) on one side and a relative on other side like dead body with procession. After reaching at the cremation ground with *Roja* (priest) they offer two parts of food, one for departed soul and the other for his bodyguard on the tripod of bamboo. This is called as *Machali Janaie Khungnaie* (*Kiriya ko Bhoj*). After this they give a feast to all persons who had attended the funeral, thereafter only the pollution period comes to an end. In this way Meche community use bamboo ritually from birth to death ceremonies.

CONCLUSION

The livelihood and cultural or traditional knowledge of Meche community is very much connected with the bamboo plant. They are greatly involved with the various uses of bamboos in their life cycle rituals and for their material culture, so they try to grow bamboo plant in their homestead land as much as possible. In conclusion we can say that Meche community use bamboo plant as a major part of their life for their livelihood, as vegetable, for house construction, for religious purposes, as hunting and fishing material, as musical instrument, and for many other domestic items for their daily uses. It has been observed that the ritualistic use of bamboo in their life cycle is to some extent different from other ethnic groups of Nepal.

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