

# Chapter 3

## 3.6 Socio-economic and Cultural Status of Endangered Raute

### Background

There are various legends behind the naming of Dailekh. And one of them is because it was a land where Dadhichi Rishi or hermit had done meditation and hence it was named after him to be Dadhichi Lek to later become Dailekh. Another instance is that it was called Devlok as the Debatas or Gods had stayed here during the Satya Yuga and it later transformed into Dailekh. There are also people who believe that this place was called Dailekh for being known as Dahi Lek due to abundant availability of milk and dahi or curd for being a favourable environment for dairy farming.

Dailekh is a place with a very old settlement due to its favourable climate, where it is not very hot during summer and neither very cold during winter. In terms of keeping one's surname on the basis of the place of birth of the ancestors, historians and culture experts have verified that Dailekh is the birthplace of 36 castes. Of the 125 caste groups enlisted in Nepal, it is believed that the ancestors of 36 of them spread across Nepal from Dailekh. Almost one-fourth of all the caste groups were from Dailekh is proved by the fact mentioned in the first stone inscription written in Nepali language

'KirtiKhamba'<sup>1</sup>.

Likewise, the oldest stone inscription written in Nepali in 1038 B.S. also verified by the Department of Archeology is a testimony to the fact that Dailekh was an age-old human settlement. Furthermore, the wandering of the Raute community living a hunter-gatherer life in and around Dailekh also adds to the belief that Dailekh was an age-old settlement. The Raute community has been living in Dailekh as well as neighbouring districts considering that it is easy from the security and adjustment perspective as the society accepts its old customs and traditions.

The Raute community has also chosen Dailekh as the place of their habitation because of the abundance of jungles that provides them timber to make wooden items for livelihood and medicinal herbs that is used for any physical injury and minor illness. The Raute community people are found wandering around Dailekh as well as Surkhet, Accham, Salyan and Dang. Unless there is any special reason to migrate, they are usually found to live in a particular location for a maximum of three to four months. When they have to migrate, they usually do so to a location that is reachable in three to four

1. First stone inscription of Nepali language 'Kirtikhamba'.

hours by foot. While migrating accordingly, all the members of the family carry their belongings, except for those who are assigned to help the elderly members. They do not use any means of transport during the migration.

### **Objective of the Study**

- To acquire information about the socio-economic and cultural situation of the Raute community.
- To identify the problems facing this community and their solution.
- To facilitate the distribution of social security allowance and other amenities provided by the government to this community.
- To draw the attention of the responsible agency towards ways to easing the lifestyle of this community.
- To help enhance the transparency and accountability of the non-government organisations and government budget and programmes related to the Raute community.

### **Importance of the Study**

Article 18 of the Constitution of Nepal<sup>2</sup> provides for fundamental rights including the Right to equality before the law (sub-article 1) which reads “All citizens shall be equal before the law.” However, Sub-article (3) provides that nothing shall be deemed to prevent the making of special provisions by law for the protection, empowerment or development of the socially and culturally backward caste, class, region, gender or minorities. As a result, this issue has been raised to draw the attention of the government to introduce additional programmes for the protection and welfare of the endangered Raute community and about the effectiveness of the present initiatives of the government.

### **Methodology**

As majority of the members of the Raute community live in and around Dailekh, a study was first carried out by reaching to their settlements in order to understand their daily lifestyle, food, practices and customs, and their day-to-day problems. Accordingly, since the study began for around six months starting mid-June 2018, the study team reached Garchakhola, Bhyanje danda in ward no. 8 of Gurans rural municipality, Pakhapani of the same ward, and in Gangatekhola of Lekbesi municipality-9 of Surkhet district, Ratekhola in ward no. 3 and to the jungle in Chiple ward no. 1 of Lekbesi municipality while preparing this study report in early January this year.

During this period, the study team spent the highest number of days including one month and 12 days in Garcha, around one month in Chiple, three days in Ratekhola and eight to ten days in other locations to observe the Raute community, the process of relocation of their habitat and their lifestyle in the new location.

Prior to this study, members of the team had reached the similar places where Rautes reside and hence were familiar as journalists to them, which made it easy to talk to them, document their details and take photographs. Raute people do not want to talk to unknown persons and want money for any photographs. Apart from the repeated meetings with the Raute community, information was also gathered about the culture and practices of the Raute people from learned people who had information about them and from the local residents of the locations where the Raute migrated.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The focus of the study was in understanding the culture and practices,

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2. Constitution of Nepal 2015

language, communication, conduct, food, religious practices and customs of the Raute community. Also, the social security entitled to the endangered community including the Raute community and the status of the support and services provided by the social organizations and government agencies, and their utility were explored.

### Lifestyle

The nomadic hunting gathering tribe of Raute shift their locations in various jungles. They run their livelihood by bartering products made out of timber from the jungle with cereals in the nearby village. Making various wooden products, hunting monkeys and going to the nearby villages to beg is their daily activities. They reach to the village with the wooden utensil they have produced and exchange it for food grains and return back to their temporary shelter by assuming the time required for it. Those going out for such purpose are not permitted to stay outside of the settlement. Except when the Mukhiya or heads of the Raute community go to the capital to meet high-level officers and for treatment in case of serious illness, nobody in the community is allowed to stay overnight outside of their settlement.

They use tree leaves and branches to construct an egg-shaped settlement with an empty space in the middle for the children to play and the women to prepare meal. The women also work in constructing the temporary huts.

For the Raute people living in the village and indulging in farming, and feeding for free from others is an offense. Once they start travelling they do not drink water from the river or pond, but only from the main water source. The only asset they hold is the cooking utensils, tools used to chop timber and some hunting weapons. They believe that the hunting will not be successful if they meet an

outsider dressed in shirt and pant. And also that God is angry, if the hunting does not bear fruit.

### Why don't they construct house and live in one location?

There are three reasons why the Raute community do not reside permanently in any location. **First reason**<sup>3</sup>- they have a custom of leaving the place immediately if a member of the community dies in the place of residence. If a member dies, as per the custom, they have to bury the dead in the same location and move out crying in the search for a new place of residence. Soon after the death of a member of the community, they start looking for a new place to leave and considering that place to be a bad omen. The new location helps them forget the pain of the death and console themselves saying that the dead is now gone, and nothing will happen to others. And gradually, they forget about the instance of the death.

It is not that they shift their settlement only when a member of the community dies. They also shift to another location, in case they no longer find the particular species of timber that they use to make the wooden products. This is the **second reason** to shift locations. Around 10 to 15 years ago, the community would shift to a new location only after exploring the possibility of finding the particular species of timber. But now with the slow sales of wooden utensils and the government providing allowance to the Raute community, they have also started giving consideration to the proximity to the marketplace while shifting their settlement.

Lately, there is a practice of shifting base only after the Raute Mukhiya or the head and some designated young men select the appropriate location after studying the possible new settlement. But Maha Mukhiya or the senior most head

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Mahin Bahadur Shahi remembers the Raute community moving in a group to a new location and setting up base at the place where it falls dark.

The **third reason** for the Raute community to not reside permanently is found to be an impact of the latest social psychology. Even if there is no death in the community for a long time, in case there is increased flow of outsiders to the place, then the rule is to migrate from there, says Raute Mukhiya or Head Surya Narayan Shahi.

### **The Issue of Identity Card**

As the Raute community was living a nomadic life, hunting and gathering in and around Dailekh, the Gurans rural municipality in the district began distributing identity cards to all members of the community since August 15, 2018. The main reason of the rural municipality distributing the identity card is to make the census of the Raute community fact-based and organize the distribution of services to them on behalf of the government.

A group of Raute community members have been living permanently at Aampani in ward no. 12 of Parsuram municipality, Dadeldhura and Rajyuda in ward no. 4 since the past 34 years. Some children from the Raute community living in Aampani have also begun going to school. Some youth have acquired their citizenship certificate and are living as forest guards, and joined police and army. The practices of the Raute here show that they have returned to normal lifestyle.

After from the group that was recently given identity card in Dailekh, there are no other Raute groups living a nomadic, hunting-gathering life. The data collected then by the Gurans rural municipality shows that there are only 149 Raute people. Earlier, the social security allowance was distributed in their place of residence itself based on the names that were listed down verbally. But following

the distribution of the new identity card, it has become the basis for them to receive services provided by government and non-government organisations.

### **Population and Territory**

According to the 2011 Census by the Central Bureau of Statistics, the total population of Raute in Nepal is 618. Raute stand with the group with the third lowest population followed by Kusunda which have 276 members and Nurang with 278 members. And among the total population, 137 were registered as wanderers.

### **Permanent Residence in Dadeldhura**

Like the wanderers in and around Dailekh, another group wandering across Darchula, Bajhang and Bajura was provided permanent residency in 1984 at the initiative of then Pradhanpancha or the Administrative Chief of Jogbudha Nanda Lal Joshi, according to the elders. Then the Raute Mukhiya or Head who used to come to barter wooden utensils due to food scarcity in the mountain region was offered a place to stay near the village, with the facility of access to the forest as well, and kept at Aampani and Rjyuda. Even though they were housed there, they had tried to leave the place saying that it was a bad omen for then but Joshi stopped them, according to Ganesh Prasad Joshi, the present Chair of ward no. 12 in Parsuram municipality.

According to local resident Laxmi, though it's been more than 34 years that the Raute are living in Aampani and Rajyuda, it was only around 10 years ago that they began forging marital relations with the Chettris. Many youth from the Bohara, Bista and Khatri community have fallen in love with Raute girls and married them. Raute youths have also married to girls from the Magar community. Though they undergo arranged marriage within the Raute community, they

endorse only love marriage outside of the community. They have yet to undergo any arranged marriage with community outside the Raute group. All the Raute people living in and around Dailekh call themselves with surname of Shahi. They define Shahi into three categories including Kalel, Raskoti and Samal but all those living in Dadelhura identify themselves as Raute only. The Raute people in Dadelhura have also begun registering the birth of their children while the youths also register their marriage. Not only that, after reaching the eligible age, they have also started acquiring citizenship certificate. They are proactively working to develop such government documents on time, as it is on this basis that the government provides them with the social allowance in the category of endangered indigenous group.

### **Endangered Indigenous Allowance**

The Government of Nepal has enlisted ten ethnic groups with less than 10,000 population as per the 2011 census<sup>4</sup> as endangered indigenous nationalities, and subsequently provided social security allowance. Accordingly, the Raute community is also entitled to it.

The ten endangered indigenous nationality groups began receiving social security allowance for the first time<sup>5</sup> since the fiscal year 2065/66 based on the social security operation procedures introduced by the then Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Administration. The allowance that they receive is double of the amount that the senior citizens receive. Then the elderly citizens used to receive 500 rupees every month and accordingly the endangered indigenous nationalities started to receive 1,000 rupees per month. Since the fiscal year 2073/74 the social security allowance for elderly citizens and single women was increased to 1,000 rupees and

hence the allowance for the endangered indigenous nationalities group reached to 2,000 rupees per month.

Other groups in the endangered indigenous nationalities are Bankariya, Surel, Hayu, Raji, Kissan, Lepcha, Meche, Kushbadiya and Kusunda. Everyone from a newborn to an elderly in these communities are receiving the social security allowance.

The Raute people living permanently in Dadelhura receive their social security allowance from the Parsuram municipality. However, for the Raute living a nomadic life in Dailekh, the concerned rural municipality or municipality needs to make a demand for it with the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Administration. As a result, they were deprived of this allowance. And to address this problem and with a long-term goal of establishing a permanent settlement for them, the Raute people in Dailekh were provided with identity cards in an understanding with Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Administration. Identity cards were distributed to 149 Raute people based on the then population on August 15, 2018 by the Gurans rural municipality of Dailekh<sup>6</sup>. But Raute Mukhiya Surya Narayan Shah agreed to receive the identity card only in the condition that they would not be pressurized later to acquire citizenship certificate. A cabinet decision was also taken on June 13, 2018 that no matter where the Raute go after developing their identity card, they will be receiving social security allowance and other services from Gurans rural municipality.

### **Three Great Enemies of the Raute**

The wandering Raute community take education, farming and permanent residence as their greatest enemy. This is also verified by the fact that the Raute who resided permanently in Dadelhura

4. National Census 2011

5. Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration

6. Gurans Rural Municipality, Dailekh

since 1984 declined to go to school for a long time.<sup>7</sup> After continuous effort and initiative, of the around 600 population there hardly five to six persons have completed school leaving certificate or SLC level. In the last 10 to 15 years however, they are gradually sending their children to school. But the Raute living a nomadic life in and around Dailekh do not allow even volunteers to educate them, by stating that the Raute should not read and write.

The wanderer Raute also say that they should not indulge in farming as well. “If we also do farming, then how will we remain as Raute?” questions Mukhiya head Mahin Bahadur Shahi. Despite not being involved in the farming, they however breed goats that they take with them in their nomadic life. Rautes also believe that they should not touch a pig, except when it is being sacrificed to the God. They hunt monkeys in the forest, the meat of which is a delicacy they love. Apart from this, they also eat meat of goat that they have reared or purchased from the village. Before starting to receive the social security allowance, they used to barter food grains with the wooden utensils they make. The whole grains are crushed manually to cook and eat. Some also sold such goods in cash and purchased cereals from it. But since they started receiving the social security allowance, they have started purchasing rice and lentils from the market.

The hunting-gathering Raute are fully against permanent residence. They usually shift to lower ground during the winter and climb to the hills for a favourable climate during the summer. They also claim that they have a better knowledge of where to settle in which climate.

### Surprising Practices of the Raute Community

- The hunting-gathering Raute do not

wear stitched cloth. Any cloth they needs to be stitched and worn, they stitch it themselves with the help of a needle.

- Nobody is allowed to stay outside of the settlement. But for treatment of serious illness and to meet government officials the Raute Mukhiya and the designated people can go out after informing about the number of days and place of visit. This is a liberal practice that they have adopted.
- The Raute do not count the number of members in their community. They believe that counting would lead to a decline in the number.
- Since they regard water from the source as pure, they usually try to find a place where there is a water source for a new settlement. But lately, as they also consider proximity to market for shopping, they have started drinking water from the river and streams. They regard piped water to be toxic.
- Raute women are not allowed to comb their hair and do make-up. They are also not allowed to wear a *Tikuli*.
- Raute eat meat only by barbequing it. They say that cooking would spoil the state.
- After a Raute girl starts menstruating, she is married within the community. Nobody is allowed to marry boy or girl outside the community.
- If there is no eligible boy to marry to, the Raute girl will have to wait for the right one to become 15 years old. A girl named Gajali, who is around 28 years old, has to wait for boys of 10 to 11 years old to cross 15 years as there is no one that she can marry now.
- There is a practice of arranged marriage in the Raute. Earlier, it would

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be the Raute Mukhiya who would choose the girl and boy for marriage. Now, they have a liberal rule that allows marriage if the parents agree to it.

- There is no polygamy in the Raute community. And widow/widower marriage is also not allowed. Gajali is still unmarried because polygamy is prohibited.
- On the day of marriage, the new couple gets a new separate hut. They do not use contraceptives.
- Sexual relations is limited between husband and wife, extra-marital relations is prohibited.
- Elderly who cannot work, single women, physically challenged and the children receive collective support from others.
- The Rautes beg what they need, but not steal.
- They bargain what they want to buy, but take it only after paying the price for it. Anything that they have eaten or purchase collectively will be paid individually.
- After the food is ready, they eat together but not wait for the head or any member of the household.
- They worship God at midnight.
- If a child commits a mistake, he/she is suggested to not repeat it but never beaten for it.
- They do not indulge in physical assault if there is a dispute. There are not violent fighting as the problem is resolved by putting it before the Mukhiya.
- The door of the hut of a widow is put in the opposite direction, if the door of others is facing east, and then the door of a widow will face west.
- If any member dies, then the settlement is abandoned and a new place sought.

- When they shift the settlement it is usually not far than a half day walking distance. On the day they shift, they will carry all the goods from the previous settlement on the same day itself.
- They do not use scissors to cut hair, but shave it with the help of a blade. But they do not cut the hair of children below 10 years of age.
- Raute women are not discriminated during menstruation or soon after child birth.
- They do not return to the settlement or place where they have lost a member for 12 years.

### Marriage Custom

In the hunting-gathering Raute community, arranged marriage is practiced, marriage with self-decision is not allowed. If a boy who has reached 16 years<sup>8</sup> likes a girl who has reached puberty, then they can make a proposal of marriage to the Mukhiya or the guardians. They can marry only if their proposal is accepted.

On the day of marriage, pleasant-ries are exchanged and is celebrated by drinking home-made rice beer. Women also drink rice beer. It is mandatory to take part in the Raute dance during a celebration. Even the bride and the groom are asked to perform the Raute dance.

On the day of marriage, the new couple get a separate hut. On the day of marriage, there is a community feast but it will be a separate kitchen for them the day after the marriage. They are not allowed to live together with the family.

### Obstacle to Marriage of Gajali, Batuli and Youths

In the case of the people in general except the Raute, the youth do not have sufficient time to think about their mar-

riage as they are busy studying or in work, as many youth do not think about marriage until they become self-dependent. With rising modernity, some are found to have not married even after reaching the right age, for trying to find someone who resonates with their feelings and emotion.

But the situation for Raute girl Gajali is different. It is not because of a concern of her future or indulgence in any busy work but lack of an eligible boy that she remains unmarried. Everybody who has visited the Raute settlement or is going there will be informed about the difficulty faced by Gajali to get married.

Almost 28 years old, Gajali has not been able to marry is because there are no boys that she can marry to. Her mother was born to the Rasakoti family while she holds the surname of Kalel. So, both these surname is incest relations for her and those that she can marry are too young. As a result, a Raute girl like her has to wait for boys to cross 15 years of age, and currently a Raute boy with the surname that she can marry with is only 9 years old. And it has also not been specified that she will marry him as he is too young now. If she has to wait for the boy to become 15, then she will be 34 years by then.

Raute youths are not allowed to marry non-Raute youths. As a result, Gajali is compelled to stay single. Batuli, who is 26 years old, faces the same problem like Gajali. Batuli is also a daughter of Kalel clan and niece of Rasakoti clan. As a result, she has exactly the same problem as Gajali when it comes to marriage.

Furthermore, 17 boys who have completed 20 years of age from the Raskoti and Kalel clan have not found a Raute girl to get married to. Raute Mukhiya Mahin Bahadur Shahi's son has already become 32 years old. But is not married for there is no woman from the clan that he can marry with. Meanwhile, Shiva Raj has been engaged to a 13-year-old girl but he

can marry only after she reached puberty, according to Raute programme coordinator Lal Bahadur KC.

Hence, even though nearly 2 dozen youth remain single for not being able to find a Raute girl that they can marry to, they have not been able to challenge the rule that bars them from marrying non-Raute girl. They also carry a fear that the girls from outside would not want to marry a Raute boy, and thereby it's unlikely that they would make such accept such a big social challenge.

### **Death Rituals**

Among the hunting-gathering Raute community, if a child who is below 6 months dies, then they wrap the body with a thick cloth and leave it in the open under a tree near the settlement. If anyone above 6 months dies, the person is buried on the same day in the courtyard of the hut that he/she used to live in. After burying the dead, a chicken is severed and the blood offered on to the mud above the graveyard.

After completing the burial, they eat meat and liquor. Mukhiya Head Mahin Bahadur Shahi argues that alcohol is consumed to forget the dead member of the community. Soon after consuming meat with liquor, they shift to a new settlement. They don't even take the name of the person who has died.

### **Raute Project**

The Social Services Centre has been running the Raute Project in order to help the hunting-gathering Raute return to normal life. The four-year project began since last Shrawan with the support of TDH AI Luxembourg under which 3 field-based staff have been appointed to move along with the relocation of the Raute settlement.

Health Assistant Binod BC for facilitating health education to the Raute people and Durga Khatri and Lal Bahadur

Khatri as a couple teacher to help them improve their social conduct are working as the field-based staff. They travel along with the Raute to the play where they re-settle from one place to another. But as the Raute people would not allow them to live with them, they spend the day with them and then return back in the evening to the nearby village. Earlier, the relocation of settlements would not be known but now they inform these staff, said SO-SEC Chairperson Hira Singh Thapa.

Raute Project provides warm clothes in winter, tents to ward off rain during monsoon and medicine and well as material support to adopt a healthy lifestyle. It was based on the concept of the Raute Project that the Gurans rural municipality distributed identity cards to the Raute people, according to chairperson of the rural municipality Khem Raj Oli.

Prior to the Raute project, the Raute Uplift Foundation had been providing food, clothing or any other goods that is scarce for them, and also took the initiative to provide them the social security allowance. Chairperson of the Foundation Satya Devi Adhikari is known as the 'niece of the Raute' for working to improve the lifestyle of the Raute community.

### **Is it Possible to bring the raute to a normal life?**

If it is difficult to change the perception of any person or the person does not change, then he/she is usually called a person with a Raute-like stubbornness. Even people who have never seen a Raute are found using this saying, which shows how difficult it is to change the perception of the Raute community. However, the efforts by Raute Project, Raute Foundation and Gurans rural municipality show that continuous efforts can make it possible, and some positive signs are appearing.

Earlier, they never used medicines no matter what the situation was but now they have started using iodine and betadine in bleeding sore. They used to drink

water only from the source, but have been using piped water for washing utensils. Earlier, they were not allowed to spend nights outside the settlements but now it is possible as per the need after informing the Mukhiya about it.

Even though they have said that they would not return to normal life, they have been going to meet with the President, the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers and heads of local level and Chief District Officers, seeking support to resolve their problems and returning with food and clothing. They also like to indulge in celebrations. Hence, it shows that they could return to normal life with continuous efforts.

Raute people are very fancied with mobile telephone and visuals, hence audio-visual medium could be used to transform them, says journalist Bhakta Shahi, who has been working for the Raute community since a long time. It would be effective to help the children read and write during the day, and show visuals about the importance of healthy habits and cooked food during the evenings to adult Rautes, he said.

However, this should be done only if the Raute people wish to return to normal life voluntarily. Otherwise, the haphazard programmes of any government or non-government organisations carried out with the wish of bringing changes in them may not be sustainable. Those who run project or immediate assistance need to support them with goods based on their needs during difficult times like monsoon and winter. Mattress and readymade garments donated to the Raute community without considering the need were found to have been sold to the local residents for comparatively cheap price. Even food stuff distributed to the Raute are found to have been sold, as the Raute never maintain a food stock that is enough for more than five to seven meals. If it is excess they either sell it or throw it away.

The local level administration should also issue strict directives to the locals to not purchase goods that have been donated to the Raute people. Unless it is made a punishable act, there is a risk of misutilization of funds. It would appropriate to set a system of a one-door policy of providing support or services to them.

### References

1. Central Bureau of Statistics
2. National Census 2011
3. Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration
4. Karnali Province, Ministry of Social Development
5. Lekbesi municipality, Surkhet
6. Gurans rural municipality, Dailekh
7. Social Service Centre (SOSEC)
8. Raute and endangered ethnic groups uplift foundation
9. District Coordination Committee, Salyan
10. District Coordination Committee, Dailekh
11. Parsuram Municipality, Dadeldhura
12. Local newspapers and online news portal
13. Reports on Raute community

