

# Changing Religion among the Damai community in Sikkim and its impact on their Traditional Folk Music

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## ABSTRACT

*There are manifold factors that have been obstructing the culture of traditional folk music and instruments of Damai community in Sikkim. Traditionally this community has shouldered the entire responsibility related to the production of folk music and instruments in Nepali society. The sound of the Naumati Baja (Damai musical ensemble consisting of a family of nine musical instruments) echoes almost all the region of Eastern Himalayan including Sikkim, Darjeeling hills and parts of Nepal. The presence of Damais and their musical ensemble Naumati Baja considered being an essential and auspicious during social occasions and rituals because it has a huge social and cultural significance. But present society witnessing lots of changes in the culture of Naumati Baja brought by various factors and religious proselytization among Damais is one such factor. Despite having lots of other factors this paper will only try to understand the change that has been elicited by religious conversion especially in the context of Sikkim.*

**Keywords:** Damai community, Naumati Baja, religious proselytization, changes.

## 1. Introduction

The Nepali community is consists of various sub-cultural stocks with considerable differences in physical characteristic and customs. Culturally each of this sub-sectional group has their own respective traditional caste based occupation, functionally to meet the occupational prerequisite of the society. The occupational system has its root in the caste system which is ascribed in nature and once individuals became a member of particular caste group their entire course of life limiting and determine by it such as the choice of occupation, marriage partner, residence etc. Each caste group is associated with a particular occupation or set of occupations which link it in an interdependent, hierarchical set of relationship with other caste groups in the society (Horan, 1974).

In such caste-based society, sections of the population are traditionally involved in crafts, arts, folk music and instruments etc. related occupation. Such occupation and position are fixed and ascribed and are transmitted through the rigid system and have less scope for innovation at both the individual and collective level (Bourdieu, 2006). There are various occupational castes in Nepali society who have some sorts of contractual agreement with their clients for service. *Damai*, *Gaina* and *Badi* are the traditional musician castes basically being involved in the music production during auspicious social occasions (Newpane, 2013: 326). The *Gaina* and *Badi* are mostly concentrated in Nepal but a huge number of Damai community are also settled in Sikkim and Darjeeling. In Sikkim according to the Census of 2011, Damais constitute 1.73 per cent of its total population (Social Welfare Department Gangtok, Census 2011).

## 2. Religious Background

Damai has been following the Hindu religion since time immemorial. The origin of Damai took place in one of the oldest Hindu nation Nepal where the people get severely punished if they attempt any religious conversion. Literature has revealed that earlier if a person converted his/her religion into Christianity will be put behind the bar for a year and in case the family tried to pursued other then the imprisonment will be more longer and severe. The state considered such act of conversion as against the law and treated them as traitors because such conversion rejects all the Hindu customs, rituals and tradition that maintain a relationship in the society and family. In the past, many attempts have been made by the Christian missionaries to proselytize the local population but they did not succeed (Moik, 2012).

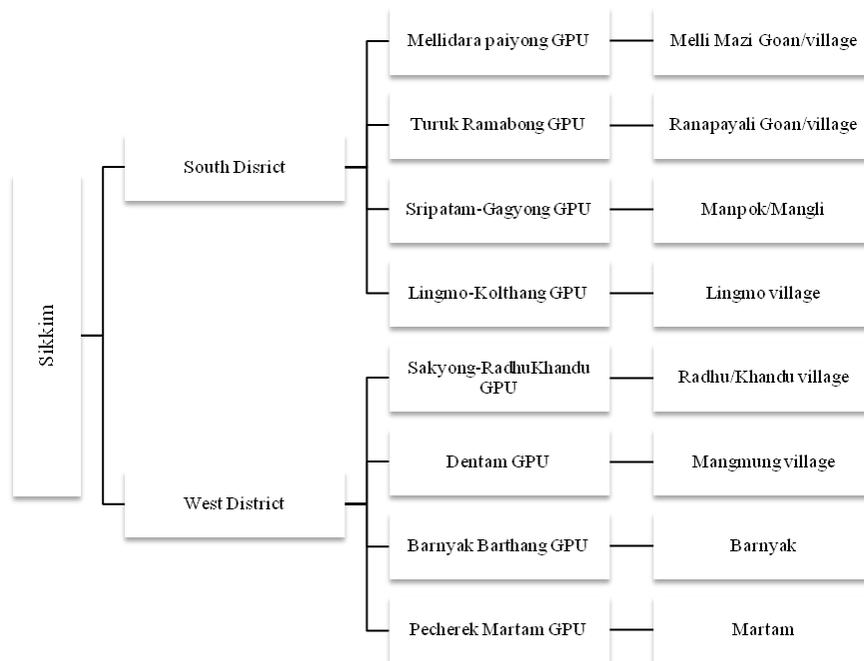
Besides Nepal huge Nepali population is also flourished in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills and over the last few decades, the perception of people and state has changed regarding their religion. They have been changing their religion to Christianity despite having their own religious background. In the Eastern Himalayan, the Christianity was first introduced by British East India Company in an around 1843 when they arrived in Darjeeling. Gradually the number of church and its branch flourished in the adjoining area of Darjeeling including Kalimpong and Sikkim. In 1892 Christianity moved to Sikkim with the help of the then political officer J. C. White and the mission station was installed in North Sikkim and after that, it gets flourish to

other remaining districts of Sikkim (Foning, 1987). The missionaries came to contact with the local ethnic groups of Sikkim and devoted their time for the well being of the society.

### 3. A case study of Ranapayali village

The study has revealed a very interesting finding regarding changing religion among the Damai community in Sikkim and its impact on their traditional occupation of folk music and instruments. Field survey has been conducted in the various Damai settlement areas in and around Sikkim. Majority of Damai population living in these settlements are Hindu by religion but there is also a settlement where almost all the Damai population changed their religion to Christianity. In Turuk Ramabong Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU) there is a Damai settlement called Ranapayali *Goan/village* (*Ranapayali* is one of the Damai's sub-caste) in Upper Ramabong where the majority of the population including Damai are converted into Christianity.

### Research Areas



Source: Field Sikkim Dec 2017- March 2018

The state socio-economic census 2006 data recorded 44413 total Christian populations in the state and out of which Damai Christian constituted 4.2 per cent. Census data disclosed over the last few decades, the Christian population in the state has been increased to 7.63 per cent of the total population (census; 2006), which has been mention in the table below. As compared to other taken GUPs, Turuk Ramabong GPU has the highest number of Christian population constituted 23.26 per cent out of its total population 3000. According to the respondent, there are around sixteen Damai households present in the Ranapayali village, and out of which 87.5 per cent is Christian and the remaining are Hindus. Besides that, there are few Damai household also found in Melli Mazi *Goan* (Melli-Paiyong GPU) where around 10 per cent of its houses are Christian.

**Table: The decadal growth of the Christian population in Sikkim**

Year	1971	1981	1991	2001	2006
Christian population	1663	7015	13423	36115	44413

Source: Census of India, the first Religion report Data, P.XXXiii and state socio-economic census 2006.

### 4. Factors of religious proselytization

Before trying to understand the reasons behind the religious proselytization among the Damai community of this particular village, first, try of comprehending the issue from the wider perspective and through the lenses of the caste system and modernization. Pattisson (2017) said Nepal is one of the fastest growing

Christian populations in the world where more than a million people identify as Christians. The Federation of National Christian Nepal (NFNC) recorded 65 per cent of Christians are untouchables who continue to suffer discrimination and abuse. Such conversion appears to have more to do with discrimination, health and poverty than religious pure belief.

Trofimov (2007) also made a similar argument in the context of India where a huge number formally called untouchable (Dalit) turning to Christianity, attracted by benefits like education and health care that are sometimes offered by western funded congregations. This allows them to seek opportunities beyond the government sector in the booming information- technology and service industries that put a premium on the westernized outlook and English language skills. Religious conversion provided them with the best way to escape from the vicious circle of the caste system which provides low status in the society.

According to primary resources, there are various reasons behind such religious conversion including the issue of social status, alcoholism, poverty and social exclusions. Damai community holds a very low position in the caste hierarchy no matter how significant their role in the society. Except a very few newcomer members associated with caste-based occupation, the majority of Damai population have experienced the issue of social discrimination during social occasions and their everyday life. As we know the behaviour of individual and groups distinct from each other to cope with the situation, the way the situation tackle by the Damai community of one area is different from the other.

Generally, they tackled such situation by adopting other means of livelihood but in terms of Damais at Ranapayali village took a different approach in order to counter the situation. They thought the main reason behind the social discrimination and low social status is a caste system which is rooted in Hindu religion and philosophy. And to break such an established threat of discrimination and social exclusion Damais have simply annihilated the existing religion and converted into Christianity that could provide equality and better social status in the society.

#### **4.1 Poverty**

Poverty is one of the major challenges that forced the Damais for such conversion. Basically, being a Hindu in a society, they have to perform various ceremonies and rituals in the rite of passage which requires a lot of money as well as social support and bonding. The source of income among the Damai community in the state is considerably low. The state socio-economic data 2006 recorded 2345 total Damai households in Sikkim and out of which 66.2 per cent Damai households earn below Rs. 5000 per month and only 2 per cent of Damai households having a good source of income that is above Rs. 25000 per month. Once, they convert to Christianity they do not have to worry about such expenses and also acquire a good social and moral support from the *mandali* (a group of Christian members belongs to the same church) during the crisis and other social occasions despite having low caste background. Usually, people those who are marginalized both in terms of caste and economic they do not hesitate to convert their religion once they get such positive assurance and security from the emerging religion like Christianity.

#### **4.2 Alcoholism**

Alcoholism is also a major reason behind such religious conversion. Use of *raksi* (a local alcohol) is very popular among the various communities of Nepali who has been residing in different geographical landscape including Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling etc. Because, it has been closely connected to their religious, social and cultural tradition. The *raksi* is needed during rituals and a social event like marriage, birth etc. the surviving inscription does not expose much about the usage of alcohol but it has been assumed that use of alcohol has a cultural significance. Along with many other communities, such culture also remains to exist among the lower caste like Damai. Generally, they are known for their liquor drinking habit and the respondents were not denied such statement in the field. State socio-economic data of 2006 also revealed 38.81 per cent Damai population consumed alcohol in Sikkim.

Historically, drinking habits among the Nepalese society popularized after the world wars when mass Nepalese soldiers were involved and got excess of alcohol in camps. Likewise, the process of home production of such alcohol for sale and establishments of *bhatti* (traditional Pubs) and *raksi* in rural and urban settlements probably root after 1918 when the soldiers returned with cash, new desires and consumerist culture (Subedi, 1999 & Shah, 2000). Gradually, such a habit of excessive drinking and rapid socialization is society began to succumb to their traditional values and norms (Dhital, et. al, 2001).

Subsequently, an alcohol consumption habits among the Damai community is hampering both their family and social life. They think that their traditional occupation related to music is mostly confined to the rituals and religious events, which they considered as the main loophole from where they could access with such ambience and become addicted. Now, they have been much more concerned and aware about this matter and try to retaliate it in a different approach, so that they could save their family and the future of the coming generation. The religious conversion is the best possible way that they have found in the society to

encounter the sicknesses of alcoholism. Once a person or family changed their religion to Christianity they find a completely new way of living under the guidance of church and *mandali*, and help them to abstain from such ill habits.

A 55 years old lady who is a wife of *naika* (head of the Baja group), a resident Ranapayali village states that *"here what happening was most of the male member used to dink raksi and spoiling their family and social life and when they get invited to grace the social occasion with their rich traditional Baja, usually they used to get drunk and ruined the social milieu and get bitten by the hand of local public. Hence, the member of the Damai family often does not allow their elder member to participate on such occasion because if the situation turns chaos they could not protect themselves. Now most of Damai family along with some other communities in this village turning into Christianity so that their coming generation will take the right path in the future by abstaining from such drinking habit. However, the result is positive and they are more optimistic about their coming generation. After such a religious conversion, our people are getting abstain from such drinking habits and taking a life in a positive direction. They are under the surveillance of mandali and if they did something against the doctrine of Christianity they have to give an explanation and confess their misdeed in front of god as well. Such strict regulation helps them to bring back in the track"*.

Some of the respondents highlighted the significant use of alcohol by the Damai musicians. There are few wind instruments including *Shanai and Narsingha* which cannot play without consuming alcohol because instruments like these required extra efforts, energy and feeling to produce sound and led the other instruments. Some of them use alcohol as a medicine so that they perform well in the social occasions. But sometimes such habit of alcohol consumption spoils the name and image of the whole Baja group. So, in the present scenario, they try not to entertain such culture of alcohol consumption anymore among the Damai musicians. If the member of Baja group consumes excessive alcohol and destroys their image on such social occasion then they will be boycott from the group. Some of the *naika* said *"recently we have rejected our musicians members from our group because they have been spoiling our group's name by consuming excessive alcohol and misbehaving with the public/customer. Now we are expecting something good from the society in terms of social status and prestige but what I believe is to get such status and social prestige first we have to represent ourself well"*.

##### **5. Consequences of religious proselytization on Damaitraditional Folk music**

Literature has shown that there are various communities present in the Eastern Himalayan who have been changing their religion to Christianity and its direct impact on their tradition, rituals, customs etc. are quite visible. Once such cultural traits are always based upon the religious background. There are many communities settled in the Eastern Himalayan including Sikkim and Darjeeling hills who have been changing their religion and facing the similar circumstances.

Lepcha (2010: 114) Lepcha is one such indigenous tribe of this land who had changed their religion from animism to Buddhism and to Christianity due to various internal and external influences. With such changes, the notion of god and concept of religious faith changed among the Lepchas in Darjeeling hills and Sikkim. As a result, their earlier social customs and religion remained no more valid among them and their mode of worships, festivals, adopted norms and institutional practices get changed. For example, the traditional Lepcha marriage ceremony remains lasts for months of celebration with locally made beer, songs and dance and which involves huge expanses, the Christian marriage ceremony conducted in the church seems popular and preferred by the Lepcha converts in Darjeeling.

Diana Riboli (2000), an Italian anthropologist who spent years on researching Chepang (one of Nepal's most disadvantaged indigenous group) shamanism in the area around Manahari. Missionaries emphasis the healing aspect of Christianity, trying to put an end to the traditional rituals and charismatic power of the local shamans.

Likewise, the traditional musician community Damai of Ranapayali village have been changing their religion to Christianity in search of new hope and aspirations. But such conversion also has a reverse consequence on their rich tradition of folk music and instruments. Along with this village, a huge population of adjoining areas under the jurisdiction of Turuk- Ramabong GPU also converted to Christianity and it has a huge impact on the traditional occupation of Damai. In the past, Damai musician was getting an invitation to performed their Baja during social occasions from the surrounding areas but after the conversion people stop inviting them because they do not require their presence anymore. Now, the few left out local Damai musician has to go far away to attain social occasion and earn money that requires extra time and arrangement which may lead to some kind of inconvenience.

On the one hand, they are being in the state of denial by the society as they have changed their religion and on the other now the maximum number of Damai households of this village converted into Christianity. However, till so far somehow they have managed to form a Baja group and able to perform their music in the social occasion no matter they have changed their religion. But there is a huge question in my mind that in the future they will be able to continue their traditional occupation related folk music and instruments? Their newly accepted religion will not create the hurdles between their religion and traditional profession which was deeply rooted in formal religious faith and mythology? Because probably the Damais who has been converted recently into Christianity was the first generation Christian who has the past experience of their traditional occupation and they have been socialized according to their traditional and cultural values system that provides them space to learn their tradition. But what will be the socialization pattern of coming Christian Damai generation?

## 6. Conclusion

Religion has both the positive and negative aspects in the life of the community. People those who belong to the higher strata sees religion especially Hinduism and its caste system in a positive way because it provides them with a decent socio-economic status in the society. But on the other hand, those who have a lower position in the caste hierarchy perceive the system in a different way. They considered it as a source of oppression and marginalization and as a result they always try to find the better option to escape from such a situation. Damai is one such marginalized community whose socio-economic condition is low in the society as compared to other communities. As many others marginalized communities, the Damai community of some part of Sikkim also adopting the same strategy to tackle the situation by converting their traditional Hindu religion into Christianity. However, such religious proselytization brings comparatively much higher socio-economic position and support system in the society but it has been also hampered their rich culture of traditional folk music and instruments that was rooted in Hindu religion.

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