

Notes and Commentaries

Vulnerable Groups in Jodhpur: Two Case Studies

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Abstract

Sansis and Nats are two dalit communities in Rajasthan. They were classed as criminal tribes before 1947. Many of them migrated to Jodhpur from the neighbouring districts. Subsequently one colony each was established on the city's outskirts where they were settled. The paper looks at their socio-economic conditions. Most of them are self-employed. Literacy levels are low and they are believed to be involved in illegal activities. Since they are still not a part of the mainstream of the society, they suffer from lack of social security.

Key words: Sansis, Nats, Self-employment, Education, Illegal activities, Social security

Villages in the princely state of Marwar in Western Rajputana (now called Rajasthan) were inhabited by several vulnerable groups. They lived outside the normally acceptable social fabric. They were also called the criminal tribes. Among them were the Sansis and Nats. They were traditionally condemned by the common people. They were treated as untouchable as well as lawless, and lived in the periphery of the villages.

Sansis were lowest in the social ladder and looked to the scavengers as their superiors from whom they begged and whose leavings they ate. They were hereditary bards of the scavengers, calling them *Dhanis* or masters. They roamed about in the jungles and hunted wild animals. Other people considered them as habitual thieves. Men slept till late in the day and spent the night on the prowl, signals being conveyed by a jackal's cries. Their chief weapon was a staff. A Sansi reportedly could face an attack on him up to a hundred staffs with one staff alone. If his staff broke down, the women threw another staff at him. Because of his low social status, his victims did not touch him and he could be driven away with staffs alone.

Another socially excluded group was of the Nats. They were vagrants who lived by feats of dexterity, sleight of hand, fortune telling, etc. They were rope-dancers, and gymnasts, performing antics with long bamboos. They trained their children in their arts from infancy and their women (generally called *kabutries*) also performed acrobats. They used oil externally as well as internally to make the body flexible. They had a saying *Tel jitna khel* (Performance depends on oil used). Even to this day Nats, particularly children can be seen performing acrobatics (Benjamin 2011).

After the country's independence, both Sansis and Nats migrated to the neighbourhood of the district headquarters of Jodhpur. The present paper deals with their socio-economic life. Most the data were collected in 2011 by interviewing the residents in the colonies of Sansis and Nats by the second author. In addition, interviews were done with Chuta Ram Deshbandhu, vice-president, Bharatiya Sehasmal Bhatu Samaj, Jodhpur and Shyam Panch Mala, chairman, Nat Society, Jodhpur.

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Socio-economic factors caused their migration from the countryside to the district headquarters. Sansis were not allowed to take water even from those ponds in which animals drank it. Coins handled by them were not touched by other castes without washing them. Social stigma was attached to the Nats too. Another reason for the migration was economic distress, which aggravated during times of drought. Both Sansis and Nats migrated around 1947 in search of better social and economic prospects. To begin with, they lived on the outskirts of the city of Jodhpur. Since the people around feared their presence, the Government settled them in two separate colonies- one of the Sansis and another of the Nats. The colony of the Sansis was established in 1976 and given the name of Nehru Colony. But it is popularly called the Sansi Colony. To begin with, they were involved in shoe-repairing, shoe-polishing, general construction activities, etc., alone. In course of time, there was a diversification in their activities. Today they are in varied occupations. Many of them are auto-rickshaw drivers. Some of them are in government service. One of them is an engineer in the Rajasthan State Electricity Board. A few others are in the nursing profession, and in the army and Air-Force. There has also been political advancement. One of the Sansis was a Deputy Speaker of the Jodhpur Municipal Corporation.

The level of education has been low among the Sansis from the very beginning. No resident in the colony was a graduate, let alone a post-graduate at the time of our survey in 2011. But the awareness of the need for education is spreading. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education was enacted in 2009 to ensure that all children between 6-14 years, regardless of their economic status, caste, class or gender, would be given elementary education by right and law. Many Sansi children are going to the government schools. But the condition of many of these schools leaves much to be desired. One government school was run on the road side on the pavement, another school with 741 children on paper was in one room only (*Rajasthan Patrika*, dated August 9, 2011). In another government school while the registered children were 50, the number of children attending the class was eight (*Rajasthan Patrika*, dated January 13, 2013). It is common to find the government schools lacking in basic infrastructural facilities (*Rajasthan Patrika*, dated August 6, 2011).

Privately managed schools also admit Sansi children. Many of them lack basic infrastructure too. When managements of some private schools were approached, they narrated their own tale of woes. Many Sansi children are the first generation of school-going children and hence weak in studies. They were unable to cope with the general standard of the class. Lack of guidance at home prevented them from doing home-work, nor did they do revision of school work. Besides, Sansi girls were undernourished and often failed to bring their lunch-boxes, saying that their brothers received better attention of the parents. School drop-outs were many. One young man left the school and joined the Industrial Training Institute. He has a mobile repairing shop and earns about Rs. 5000/- a month. He is a state-level boxer too. He won a bronze medal at the National Level Senior Boxing Championship in Mumbai in 2009. Besides, he won many state-level prizes.

Consciousness about small families is practically absent in the Sansi society. Most couples have four or five and even more children. But the problem of son preference plagues the parents. Girls are neglected in terms of food, clothing, education and in other ways.

The population of the colony was variously quoted but most quotations placed it around 5,000. Sansis live in very small but built one-roomed houses which are on either side of a narrow road in the colony. There are street lights. However, pilferage of electricity for use at homes is done from the public poles and every home had an unauthorized electrical connection. Since electricity is not paid for, it is naturally used wastefully. Occasionally, electricians from the Electricity Board come under police protection to disconnect the illegal connections, but the residents restore them back in a day or two.

The other vulnerable group covered in the study is that of the Nats. Government gave land to them for their residence. They started shifting there from about 1970. It is called Nat Raj

Colony. To begin with, they built huts, followed by tarpaulin covered dwellings, mud ceiling and lime ceiling- in that order. Of the total houses in the colony, about 70 per cent are built houses. They were built with family labour. Cement was purchased through their savings. The population of colony is around 6,000.

Earlier, their occupations were livestock breeding, acrobatics (like rope talking), dancing in havelis, manual labour, etc. Poultry and goat farming continue to be common among the Nats. Lack of education and skills has forced them to do manual labour. Although there is a large demand for domestic help in the city, common people are deterred from employing Nats because of their fear of burglaries. Very few of them have gone in for other occupations but one of them is an advocate.

Birth control is almost unknown among them. Shyamji Panch Mala, chairman of the Nat Society, has six sons and four daughters. It is common to have five to seven children in a Nat family. The usual son preference is found.

When the colony was established, literacy was almost unknown. Only about 2 per cent of the adult Nats could read and write Hindi, while only 4 per cent of them knew how to put their signature. Matters have taken a turn for the better. Today about 20 per cent children go to school. This includes both boys and girls. Besides, government schools are about two kilometres away. What has been mentioned about the schools where Sansi children go is also true of the schools where Nat children are admitted. However, about 80 per cent of the children do not attend the school. The principal reason for it is poverty. In terms of education, children of Sansis and Nats are disadvantaged. As Desai, Adams & Dubey (2010) write about the children of the weaker sections, "Thus, teachers' discriminatory behaviour, combined with parental lack of social capital, increases the likelihood that the school experiences of marginalized children are far more negative than those of upper caste children, resulting in lower levels of academic skill acquisition".

Nats are considered to be involved in law and order problem so much so that the city residents avoid taking the roads near their colony at night. When thefts take place even in the city, they are attributed to the Nats. Even if flowers are plucked from a garden, particularly at festival times, Nats are held responsible for the loss.

They are alleged to be extensively involved in illicit distillation. Nat colony is considered to be the beehive of this activity. Used battery cells and other such dangerous items are said to be used for the purpose. Such stories are reinforced because Nats are not communicative. They avoid meeting strangers, suspecting them to be police informers.

There are some similarities in both Sansi and Nat colonies. Small one or two roomed tenements are on both sides of narrow roads. A small veranda in the front is used for cooking. Their food is both vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Houses have public conveniences. There is not much furniture in a house. But cell phones and television sets are commonly used. Although refrigerators are not found, some residents do have two-wheelers. Both boys and girls are married when they are in their twenties. Marriage takes place within the community. Marriage ceremonies are presided by persons other than the Brahmins. Dowry is given and taken, but it is modest. Education for children is considered a must. There is a decided preference for the English medium schools, even if fees have to be paid. Earlier there was resistance to going to hospitals, but it is on the decline now. Patients are taken not only to government hospitals, but even to private hospitals. Hence, maternal mortality and infant mortality rates have come down over a period of time. Broadly speaking, the life span of both men and women is over 60 years. There is a near absence of Sansis and Nats in trade and commerce. This is because; this activity requires a certain social and economic status as well as a degree of education.

The International Labour Organisation's notion of social security as expressed in the International Convention No. 102 includes nine core contingencies that lead to stoppage or

substantial reduction of earnings. These are sickness, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age, need for long-term medical care and for supporting families with children. In terms of these criteria, except in the case of those people who are in government or quasi-government employment, social security is by and large conspicuous by its absence among the Sansis and Nats in these colonies. Their social security problems may be divided into two categories. The first category arises out of deficiency or capability deprivation in terms of inadequate employment, low earnings, low health and educational status, among other factors, that are related to the generalised deprivation. The second category arises out of adversity in the sense of an absence of fallback mechanism (safety nets) to meet contingencies such as ill-health, accident, death and old age.

However, many a time Sansis and Nats are not able to benefit from the provisions made by the Central and State Governments to extend social security. Respondents gave a number of reasons for it. Since they are generally self-employed or employed in the unorganised sector, many of the government-sponsored schemes like group insurance schemes are not within their reach because they are addressed to the organised sector employees. True, there are other schemes like the public provident fund scheme which are open for the public in general. Illiteracy keeps Sansis and Nats ignorant of them. There are special schemes for people below the poverty line. But Sansis and Nats are unable to avail themselves of them. Banks, which implement them, insist on the proof of residence as well as other details of the borrowers. Sansis and Nats are neither capable nor willing to complete the paper work. They fear that if this information reaches the government, they might be implicated in the crimes reported to the police. Since most residents of these colonies are employed in the unorganised sector, they face the consequent problems.

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