

Chapter 7

Devipujak: Understanding Perspective and Social Discrimination

For colonial government, criminal law was one of the very important gifts to the county which can be understood with numerous examples of writing of colonial officials and writers during that time (Gandhi, 2018). Their attitudes towards ex-criminal tribes can be reflected in writing of one of the significant colonial writers Hunter (1881) who stated that “a more secure, more prosperous India where roads, railways, bridges, canals, schools and hospitals had been built; famines tackled, thugi, dakaiti and the predatory castes suppressed, trade developed; barbaric social practices like widow burning and infanticide abolished.” Another colonial writer Lt. General Sir George MacMunn described criminal tribes as beasts of the field. These sections of society have always been stigmatised, disrespected and branded as criminals since colonial and postcolonial period. The government has made various efforts through rehabilitation and reformation program for them which have not yielded into desirable outcome for them. They are still living in very extreme hardships. They are suffering from various issues such as exploitation, underdevelopment, low level of education, gender discrimination, livelihood loss and so on. They are found in most parts of the county. Their daily earning is also very less which makes it difficult for them to provide good educational opportunities to their children. They are also victim of social stigma and social integration (Gandhi, 2018).

The society in usual way looks denotified and nomadic communities with suspicions who were once living dignified life in ancient time. These sections are not looked down by mainstream society only but police department, revenue officials, local government also looked upon them with stigmatised lenses. Considering the historical fact, we can find out that it was outsider encroachment into their areas which led to seizing of their resources and plundering their life support system which pushed them to adopt illegal acts to live their life. Frequently, facing suffering from police administration and kept into confinement of prison for long time, their self-esteem was badly affected (Renke, 2008). The grievance petition reflect continues presence of ill-treatment and exploitation of denotified tribes by police department in various incidences of crime happened nearby settlements of these sections. The

labelling of criminality has not only stopped them to get education and employment but also restricted their social upliftment (Idate, 2017).

7.1 Perspective for Self and Other Communities

The historical labelling of criminality has left lasting social stigma which caused many community members to hide their original identity or integrate themselves into other communities to avoid labelling (Gandhi & Sundar, 2019). Despite efforts by government and welfare organization, these groups face prejudices, social discrimination and exploitation one or another way which has resulted into their socio-economic backwardness. Their issues need to be address differently with guarantee of constitutional recognition, special developmental schemes targeting these sections and ensuring equal status in society (Torgalkar, 2016). The stigma of criminal identity resulted in exclusion from public provisions. The prejudicial views towards these groups have kept them away to gain benefits of various public welfare programs (Pellissery, 2005). Additionally, the criminal identity has badly affected their self-esteem which created hindrances for them to assimilate with mainstream society (Japhet, Balagurumurthy & Diwakar, 2015). “It is not just their poverty or misery that marks them out, but the social and legal prejudice that takes away any shred of human dignity they might still cling to” (Heredia, 2002, p.390).

The denotified groups were included into different reserved categories which varies from one state to another. Many of them are categorised under OBC status in most places, but sometimes they are treated worse than Dalit community in society (Korra, 2019). During field work, many of them said that *Vaghri* word is used as a slang by other caste people. It is used in sense of unhygienic, living like savage or uncivilized people. Sometimes people from higher caste call them with *Oye Vhaghra Shu Kare Chhe?*⁴⁰ which make them feel hurt but they do not protest against it because they are considered powerful in village. The Gujarat government has replaced a word *Vaghri* with *Devipujak* in its official record, but people still call them *Vaghri* disrespectfully. There were two different opinions among community

⁴⁰ It is very derogatory remarks towards *Devipujak* by addressing them as *Vaghara* and asking what you are doing here?

members regarding use of word Vaghari. Some of them were in favour of using Vaghri word for their community and said that *Vaghri Shabd E Sadio Juno Chhe Ane Temani Sachi Odakh Chhe Mate Temane Vaghri Shabd Mate Abhiman Hovu Joiye* (Their identity Vaghri is centuries old so they should feel proud calling themselves Vaghri). Another opinion was that people have started using Vaghari word as a slang with comparison to unhygienic, wild, uncivilized so they do not like when people address them with Vaghri and want to be recognised as Devipujak. Once there was *Satyanarayan Katha* organised in village which was open for all people. Devipujaks were also going there and listening *Kathakar* (storyteller). One day he said during story that *Goh Marava Pade Etale Vagharivade Jaay* (Monitor lizard will go to Vaghari area at the time of its death). This proverb is very commonly used by people in society which portray Devipujak community highly inferior. Devipujak who were sitting in *Katha* did not like the disrespect toward them and left it immediately.

Their forefathers were engaged in army of local rulers and were loyal to them. Sometimes, the local rulers felt happy due to their services to them so they were ready to offer them whatever they want as gift for their loyalty to kingdom. The rulers were offering huge land for cultivation but their forefather denied and were only asked rights to keep *Dantun* in village. The Devipujaks were quite unhappy toward their forefather. They were believing that their situation would have been different nowadays if they had land for cultivation. They will not have to pass through hardship in life what they are facing nowadays. There is sub-caste known as Vedava Devipujak or Vedava Vaghari. They are called *Nanabhai* among them and they are considered lower to other sub-groups. *Motabhai* Devipujak does not have *roti-beti vyavhar* (prohibition of food and marital relations) with them. Devipujak residing in Pritampur village were known as *Datania* or *Gamechia* Devipujak. They were believing that they are labelled as criminals not due to their act but ill-acts of Vedava Devipujak. *Dhanabhai* said that *Kharekhar Chori Vedava Devipujak Karata Hoy Chhe, Pan E Loko Kehvay Devipujak Etale Badanam Badha Devipujak Thaay* (In reality Vedava Devipujak are involved in act of theft but they are known as Devipujak so the whole community is disrespected for their act).

Devipujak community is included in category of SEBC in Gujarat State (Director Developing Caste Welfare, 1978). The higher caste community consider them lower in caste hierarchy and generally do not prefer eating or drinking at their houses in villages. Devipujaks are not considered untouchables but higher caste community restrain themselves to exchanges food and water with them. They reside at peripheral area of village rather than central region which is usually occupied by higher castes in villages. There were also other SEBC castes like Bharwad and Koli who were not keeping eating and drinking relations with Devipujak community in village. They become victim of caste hierarchy often in villages but they consider themselves above to schedule caste. They strictly follow dietary restrictions with schedule castes in village. They believe that their *Kuldevi* will punish them if they keep relations with schedule castes and accept food from them. I was also asked by Panabhai who was Principal in school not to use word *Devipujak Vas* as *Vas* word is used for area where schedule caste people stay in village. He told me to refer Devipujak *Vado* for the areas where they are staying. Devipujak usually does not allow schedule caste people to their worshiping places. They consider schedule caste lower to them in social order. They also confirmed from me first that I do not belong to schedule caste before allowing me in their ritual practices. They used to ask me whether you are belonging from higher order than Devipujak or not. I was feeling very strange to answer them that I belong to the higher caste.

The Indian society is mainly divided based on caste line and social interactions are regulated based on it. The practice of purity and pollution is observed in various regions of the county. The persons belonging to higher caste consider themselves polluted by touch of lower caste people (Biju & Jothi, 2012). Devipujak community consider themselves higher to schedule caste in social order so they avoid contact and dietary relations with them. If knowingly or unknowingly, they touch or eat food offered by schedule caste, they will feel polluted themselves. They will take flame of fire on their hand and sprinkle water on body to get themselves purified. They will also plead their goddess to forgive them if they have come in contact or eaten food offered by schedule caste people. Additionally, they will accept whatever punishment given by goddess for the act. Many of them migrate to cities for earning livelihood and they come in contact with people belonging to different caste so it becomes very difficult for them to identify caste of people in unknown areas. They perform ceremony of *Melap* once in a year and pray goddess to forgive them if they have knowingly or

unknowingly come into contact with schedule caste people or eaten food offered by them. Earlier when some of the families who were giving *Dantun* to villagers were only giving to higher caste people and not schedule castes.

7.2 Relations with Other Castes

The social discrimination, destitution, low living standards, stigmatization, exclusion are hard reality for denotified community in society. They are plagued with stigma of ex-criminal tribes in most part of the county. They face ill-treatment by higher castes often in their life. It is very common to link them for any theft, robbery and illegal acts happening in nearby areas and they are the first who come under doubt of police department even if they are not involved in reality (Korra, 2019). I was known by many people in the village that I am staying and doing a research study on Devipujak community. I was also able to develop relations with different caste people during my stay in village. I had interacted with them to understand their views towards Devipujak community and social relations among various castes in village. Sometimes people were calling me and talking with me regarding research study and expressing their views towards the Devipujak community. I was going back to my home from Devipujak community in late evening and was called by Giteshbhai. He was from Brahmin community and having grocery shop in village and many people come to his shop buying groceries including Devipujaks. He was aware about my research study as he was the one who helped me to find a house on rent in village. We got indulged into talk about my study. He said that Devipujaks are still living very backward life in village and it is due to their superstitious beliefs. There were many schedule caste families in village who emphasized on education and made progress in their life. He said that they need to leave their certain rituals like *Dana* ceremony if they want to develop in their life. Education is very important for the development the community.

I went to have tea once at hotel near village and was going back after having it. I heard sound like *Saheb* from behind so I looked back and observed that someone was calling me. I went to him and he directly asked me that you are doing Ph.D on Devipujak community and I replied yes to him. He told me that he got information about my Ph.D from the hotel owner. He was from Darbar community and living in nearby village. He was involved in farming there. He

shared that he knows Devipujak community since childhood and very much aware about the life of this community. We indulged in discussion for couple of hours. He said that Devipujaks work as labourers in his farm. There was a Mogha village around 8 to 10 km away from Pritampur where majority of Devipujak families are involved in making and selling of liquor. I was informed that Devipujaks are also involved in illegal occupations like stealing. He told me that they avoid taking food and water from Devipujak family but accept *Prasadi* which includes uncooked meat during event of *Mandavo*. He gave arguments that they do not eat at house of Devipujak due to unhygienic conditions and no any other reason. He also expressed very strange view of their rituals like making women pure if she is caught for having extra-marital affair. The other caste people generally view rituals and customs of Devipujak community as superstitious and believe that it is one of the major reasons for their backwardness.

Nareshbhai was working as daily wage earner to drive tractor at house of Rajendrabha who was Darbar and retired teacher in village. Rajendrabha was around 70 years old and staying alone. I was able to develop good contact with him during my study. He was frequently discussing with me about my research study and how it is going. He was also keeping Nareshbhai well. Nareshbhai was able to move inside house of Rajendrabha without any restriction. Nareshbhai used to make tea for him and sometimes they were also having food together. But still he was having different views towards Devipujak community. Rajendrabha once said to me that “*E loko Aaadasu, Kamchaor and Chori Karvani Vruti Vada Hoy Chhe. E badha Juthu Pan Bau Bolata Hoy Chhe. Naresh Jevo To Apada Ghare Thi Kodadi Jevo Saman Chori Ne Lai Jai Eno Daru Pi Jaay. Aa To Hu Naresh Ne Saru Rakhu Nai To Devipujak Ne Ghar Ma Pan Na Ghusava Dau*” (Devipujaks are lazy people and very sharp in theft. They also lie most of the time and person like Nareshbhai will steal things such as axe from house and will drink liquor from money received by selling axe. It is the me who take care of Naresh well otherwise I will not allow Devipujak to step inside my house).

Panabhai was once travelling in bus. The incidence of theft happened recently and no one was aware about who did it. A bus conductor who was belonging to higher caste started talking that it is the Devipujak who did this act. Panabhai started opposing his views that how can he claim that it is Devipujaks who did theft as no one is aware about real culprit. It was bus conductor said that who other than Devipujak can do such inferior task. It shows that how

prejudicial a society views towards Devipujak community. It is the Devipujak community who comes under suspicion first if any illegal act happens in nearby areas and they are the one who made responsible for it even they are not involved.

I was conducting FGD with youth of Devipujak community and we were having discussion about different livelihood opportunities they were looking for. I suggested them in lighter mood to open egg shop in village as there was no any egg shop in nearby area. They answered me that no one from higher caste will come to their shop for eating. Vipul who 23 years old went to one hotel near village for job. Its owner was belonging to Patel community denied him job with giving reasons that villagers will not come at his hotel knowing that Devipujak boy is working there. There was four to five hotels and snack shop beside highway road near village. Tarun was working in one of the snack shops because they had taken debt of Rs. 40,000/- from owner of snack shop for his elder brother's marriage. He said that villages belonging to higher caste do not come to snack shop and they are aware that Devipujak is working here and serving to guests. He was employed by owner due to his debt and main customers were commuters in his shop who were not aware about caste of Tarun. He was also paid very less Rs. 100/- towards working for 12 hours a day. He had already paid half debt by working there and will leave work there once he will pay back whole debt. There was one Devipujak family whose head was Nanubhai in village. He was Bhuvo and he had love marriage with a lady belonging to Koli community. Koli community also listed under SCBC in Gujarat but they consider themselves higher in social order to Devipujak. Nanubhai got married long back and his wife was outcasted due to marriage with Devipujak.

Ramadada shared story about his brother who left his village and settled to city to get rid of exploitation by Darbar community which was dominant caste in village. His brother was working as a farm labourer at Darbar families. They were offering very low wage against their work in village and also, they were not allowed to work out of village where they were paid reasonably good wages. If they do so, they will be beaten by powerful people in village. It was the reason that his brother decided to leave the village and settled down in nearby city to get rid from exploitation by Darbar community. Due to exploitative practices, many vulnerable families started leaving the village and settled down to different places. This habit created worry among Darbar community because they were not getting enough labourers to

work in their agriculture land. So, they decided to give proper habitat and fair wages to labour class so they do not leave the village and work in their farms.

There were some Devipujaks family not in Pritampur village but nearby villages who were possessing agricultural land. Devipujaks generally borrow money from higher caste communities in occasions such as marriages or health issues of family members so the lenders will not charge interest but will ask them to mortgage land till time they return back money to them. Sometimes they need to borrow money again and again for some reasons and the time comes when they will have huge debt which is difficult for them to pay back in one time. At that time, lender will ask them to return back their money knowingly that Devipujak will not be able to pay it in single time. They will pressurise a person either to pay back money or give ownership of land to them. This way there were many Devipujak families who lost their land to lenders who were usually belonging to higher caste due to vicious cycle of debt.

Motibha was 87 years old and a retired Railway Master. He was belonging to Darbar community. He used to go for evening walk regularly and I was able to develop good relations with him during my stay in village. I was also going with him on walk sometimes when we used to have discussion pertaining to research. Motibha said that Devipujaks and schedule caste had been victim of caste discrimination. The higher castes were keeping distance from them in village though situation has changed nowadays as people have started accepting them gradually. The Patel community is having huge land followed by Darbar community in village. These are socio-economically empowered community in village. He said that there were some people among Devipujak community who were involved in illegal activities and not all of them. Sometimes Devipujaks were involved by other higher caste persons to take revenge against their rivals, but it was Devipujaks who were labelled as criminals and not person who used them for the illegal act. In his memory, he shared that Devipujaks did not trouble villagers. They are living peacefully with other communities in village.

7.2.1 Vaghario Kotho

There was a huge hall inside temple shrine situated in nearby Rathnath village which was known as *Vaghario Kotho*. It is a story of long years back that Devipujaks who were involved in criminal activities were kept inside the hall for sometimes as punishment. I got information from present *Mahant* that their forefather cursed Devipujak so they are not able to live in Rathnath village. Those who stayed there in past had to leave village due to curse and had to face lots of difficulties so none of them were able to stay in village for long time. Mahant also told that they do not allow Devipujak to stay at village as they are indulged in criminal activities and violence.

7.3 Political Participation

The nomadic and denotified groups had faced much struggle and hardship to enjoy their citizenship right. The citizenship rights include civil, political and social (Marshall, 1950). There was issue of no proper drainage facility in Devipujak area which was not address in Panchayat due to lack of their political participation. Sometimes they were getting very weird answer form Panchayat office that nothing can happen in this problem and you are supposed to live in existing condition. They were saying that *Garibo Mate Bahu Labh Aave Pan Garibo Sudhi Labh Pahochata Nath* (The government made provisions of benefits for poor but it does not reach to them). Maghiben was elected as Gram Panchayat members from Devipujak community in last term. I had discussion with her about her experiences as panchayat member. She said that she was not getting enough opportunity for participation in functioning of panchayat and no one was paying attention to her words. The panchayat office bearers were able to do what they wanted. Though she was elected member of Gram Panchayat but she was not able to represent herself there. Devipujaks were having feeling that Panchayat is not working seriously for welfare of them. They are not getting much benefits from government in Gram Panchayat.

7.4 Police Atrocities

The denotified tribes have been victim of violence and harassment often due to criminal labelling and prevailing stigma against them in society. They have been arrested by police authority even though they are innocent (Japhet et al., 2015). Devipujaks said that they are harassed by police sometimes even they are not involved in theft or any criminal activity. The incidence was that there was one person namely Hitesh was involved in criminal acts of selling some parts of gun. He was not belonging to Devipujak community. The police got information about him that he is going to deliver parts to someone at particular place and time so they made all arrangement to catch him red handed. A person with same name Hitesh who was belonging to Devipujak community was passing by there for his person work and was caught by police believing that he is a real culprit but in reality, he was not. His name was only resembling to real culprit. He was pleading to police that he is innocent and not involved in any such criminal act but police authority was not believing him. He was caught and beaten very badly by police. After sometimes, it was found that he is innocent and released later. Sometimes Devipujaks were also facing harassment by police officer during occasion of *Bali*. They were telling that other castes also practice sacrificial ceremony but the police authority does not stop or harass them.

7.5 Illegal occupation

In the beginning of my stay, the people were not being opened with me. Over the period, I was able to establish trust with them in community and they started sharing details about their life with me. Their forefathers were involved in petty illegal activities like stealing cereals from the farm to quench hunger and not very heinous crime. They said that *Chori Manas Majburi Ma Karato Hoy Chhe* (People steal under compulsion). Devipujaks were living as hunter gatherer earlier and were also so sharp in hunting. Nowadays they are aware that they will be punished under law if they hunt and had fear of police department so most of them are not involved in any such activities. During course of my stay, some of them admitted in informal talk that they had hunted animals and birds like rabbit and teetar (grey francolin) in

past. They used *Gilod*⁴¹ for hunting. There were only two families in Devipujak community who were indulged in *Desi Daru* (county liquor) selling occupation. The rest of Devipujak families in community were not having cordial relations with them. They were believing that whole community is dishonoured due to their liquor occupation in village. The remaining of them earn their livelihood from good means.

7.6 Summary

The denotified communities have faced discrimination by the British officials as well as society at large. The British government thought that they brought CTA to reform these groups but in reality, it resulted in ruining their life. The continuous facing of discrimination compelled them to hide their real identity and restrained them to integrate with mainstream sections. Though there have been efforts by government and civil society organization towards welfare of these sections; however, there is not remarkable improvement in their situation due to prejudicial mindset and social exclusion towards them. For Devipujak community, still many people address them by derogatory remarks like *Vaghara, Vaghari*. They have been victim of the caste hierarchy as higher caste people usually keeps distance from them and avoid food offered by them. They are themselves victim of caste discrimination but they consider schedule caste people lower to them in caste hierarchy. They also keep distance from them and avoid taking food offered by schedule caste people. Devipujaks are the first one come under suspicion whenever any theft happens in nearby areas. They have been often victims of exploitation and discrimination by powerful communities in village which led to leave the village and settled down in cities or nearby areas.

Devipujaks were also denied job offer in hotel by owner giving reasons that villagers will not come to dine at his hotel if they will know that Devipujak person is working there. Their political empowerment was not notable in village. Though they were elected into gram panchayat office but their participation in decision making was very less. Their views were

⁴¹ A tool used for hunting birds, rabbits etc.

not considered by delegates who were in power. People generally think that they are involved into illegal occupations but there were only two families were indulged in occupation of illegal liquor selling and rest of them were earning their income from good sources. It was the society who labelled whole community on basis of few who were involved into illegal activities. They have been also victim of police atrocities though they were not involved in criminal activities in reality.