

Jetor: An Unrecognized Interstitial Caste Community in West Bengal, India

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic research methodology, this article engages with the questions of identity, recognition, and major economic activities of the Jetor(s), a riverine, as yet unrecognized, partly-pastoral, in-marrying, ethnic group dwelling in forestine (Jangal Mahal) West Bengal, India. If the experiences of untouchability, regression, humiliation, discrimination, lack of rudimentary education, dispossession of land, entrapment in vicious cycle, etc., are the insignia for being a 'caste', the Jetors, who may be designated as a particularly vulnerable marginalized interstitial (between tribe and caste) group, more than pass for the denomination. After Independence, many communities were recategorized as DNT, PVTG, ST, SC, etc., and no less than seven censuses were conducted, but the Jetors have remained unaccounted. Abjectly deprived, minimally 'organized', and somewhat disinclined to the denomination 'Jetor/Jatord' on account of social stigma, they still live a socially in-between life. It is critical to draw the attention of the academia and the policymakers to the Jetors because 'visibility' sometimes helps in recognition and emancipation from caste atrocities.

Keywords

Caste-Tribe Interstitiality, Jetor Community, Identity, Violence, Recognition, Social Exclusion

Background

It is important to give voice to those who are subdued by the degradation imposed by those who are vocal. The unidentified community of the Jangal Mahal area named Jetor with which this article is engaged is such a small community whose 'presence'

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has been ignored in contemporary research. The Jetors have received little attention, though from time to time attempts have been made to shield the culture of some other indigenous communities in India. This is not surprising given the opinion of both Western and Indian anthropologists that Indian society is a “kind of hierarchical system in which individuals were ranked on the basis of their supposedly inherent biological characteristics” (Guha, 2023, p. 2). The warning was sounded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (henceforth Dr. Ambedkar) long back. Referring to the existence of the criminal tribes, the aboriginal tribes, and the untouchables as an ‘abomination’ in Indian society, Dr. Ambedkar called the system “a diabolical contrivance” (1948, p. i). As an interstitial vulnerable ethnic group, Jetors are completely absent from any conversation. Just as on the Lodhas, so also on the Jetors “a negative stereotypical image” (Guha, 2016, p. 1) has been thrust upon. There is an acute lack of documentation of the Jetor community and their culture. The writer of this article has come to know via the Cultural Research Institute (CRI), Government of West Bengal, Kolkata that the CRI is apprised of the problems of the Jetors, owing to the letters of Dr. Nirmalendu De, and Professor Abhijit Guha, and the official process of identification of the Jetor community about to be started off. Preceding this research, the lone researcher to have worked in this field is Dr. Nirmalendu De (henceforth De), Headmaster (retired now) of Siromoni Birsa Munda High School. De worked for nearly eight years on the Jetors under the worthy supervision of late Professor Tushar Chattapadhyay of the University of Calcutta. In his book written in the Bengali language, De has focussed on the hybrid ethnic origin and endangered oral culture of the Jetors. The book contains a preface by Professor Probodh Kumar Bhowmick, an expert in the field of indigenous studies, and a letter by Mahasweta Devi, an eminent litterateur of Bengal. Keeping De’s contribution in mind, it may be said that explorations about the ethnic identity of the Jetors, their recognition, spatial-social exclusion, their interstitial position between tribe and caste leading to hyphenated condition of life, their condition of being caught in the interlocking structures of oppression, and most importantly their continuing deprivation with regard to the question of conferment of either caste or tribe status, etc., demand further engagement because the Jetors are even now ‘unrecognized’ and ‘undocumented’. This fact of slow violence inflicted upon them and other critical questions about their recognition as a community/group have sparked interest to carry forward the work of introducing the Jetors to the academia and the policy makers initiated by De.

Methodological Strategies

Both qualitative and ethnomethodology involving participant observation, intensive interviewing, participation in cultural events, data collection, etc., for understanding their ethnic origin, their marginalisation, semi-nomadic life, economic activities, their endogamous life, etc., have been pursued to frame the study. In the absence of any printed books on Jetor culture and literature, the present study relies mostly on field research while adhering to qualitative analysis by referring to relevant literature in the field of indigenous cultural and ethnographic studies. The researcher has faced some

procedural and ethical challenges during data collection from a community of people who are victims of centuries of indignity and humiliation. For example, some of them did not want their candid opinions about caste certificates and their deprivation to be recorded, even after being assured that there would be no breach of privacy. For some reason, the husband of a Jetor woman who is an expert in weaving *chanch* (coarse mattress made with dry reeds of thatch grass) strongly discarded the request made by the researcher for recording the *chanch*-weaving process. Another problem is that they are illiterate and cannot read questionnaires. The only recourse is to record (either audio or video) their one-to-one interviews, but sometimes they object to this also.

The Jetors: Setting and Source

Jetors comprise a distinct vulnerable ethnic group of the forestine terrain that was once part and parcel of the Jharkhandi region and culture which, according to Binoy Ghosh, has witnessed much impairment and restitution (1957, p. 334). The existence of the Jetors is ascribable to the material panorama of tension and fusion of disparate racial groups amidst the socio-political vicissitudes down the ages. The Jetors mostly live in the districts of Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, on the border regions of Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa located along the basin of Kangsabati and Subarnarekha. British rule in India was extended over multiple communities, each endowed with specific political, cultural and economic traits. They were a semi-nomadic ethnic community who, being driven from the south-west parts of India, settled in their current location. The Jetors are largely positioned at a vast social and psychological distance from the majority of caste Hindus owing to the influence of caste-race taboos in the stratified Indian society. In fact, they are doubly marginalized because other marginalized aboriginal peoples also 'avoid' their 'contact'.

Jetors have come into existence as a mixed group of people born out of unsanctioned sexual union among the outcasts of society (De, 2017, p. 17). In ancient times there lived in the south-western as well as middle parts of India many nomadic and semi-nomadic communities of people like Mahar, Kowra/Korowa/Kaur, Dom, Kalindi Dom, Dangi, Hari, Koibarto Jele, among others. They served the upper caste dominant classes. Following centuries of servitude, a section of these people belonging to lower caste and class came to be known as the 'untouchables' during the Rajput and Mughal rule. They were distanced, though their services were availed of, in dehumanizing and humiliating ways. Some of these people embraced Buddhism and at much later times, Christianity. Gradually, they scattered across different parts of India including the south-eastern parts comprising Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, south-west Bengal, etc., owing to food scarcity, livelihood problems, and caste/class oppression. According to Fakir Chandra Mahar (Qtd in De, 2017, p. 17), a few of these 'untouchable' families came to a village, Jhanjia under Borosol police station in Baharagora located in the north-east parts of Orissa and in south-west Bengal. Apart from livelihood problems, the most excruciating problem they faced owing to caste taboos in the then society, is related to the question of marrying off their daughters. Pitted against such a problem,

they began to search for communities who are akin to them, and discovered the ‘Cowra’ people with whom they got mixed in course of time. Habituated to hardship and born out of immixture, the women of these communities were well-built and full of initiative. They served the upper caste people generationally for survival. Many upper caste people of rank and dominance were attracted to them. Vulnerable and at the receiving end as they were, some of these women fell victim to the sexual advances of upper caste/class men and carried the ‘seeds’ in their womb without knowing where to go and how to survive. They were uncertain about the parentage and identity of the babies to be born. According to five senior Jeter community persons, Sri Fakir Chandra Mahar of Fekoghat, Sri Harish Barik of Khalsiuli, Sri Jhareswar Mandol, Sri Amal Chandra Mandol of Nischintapur and Sri Motilal Maity of Amdoi, “a section of the Jeters are born out of illicit sexual union between the vulnerable indigenous women and the Jamindars as well as their managerial persons who did not take the responsibilities of the babies born. The prevalence of upper caste surnames in our society bears proof to a section of ours originating from the upper caste people” (De, 2017, p. 18). In addition, some upper caste men secretly ‘married’ the ‘lower-caste’ girls against the ‘laws’ and sanction of their society. Such men as ‘lived with’ the women below their caste were driven away from society along with their ‘wives’. Nowhere to go, the aforementioned pregnant women, and the socially ostracized upper caste men who stayed among their social inferiors got scattered along the banks of Subarnarekha, Kangsabati, and Dulung River. The popular saying in their localities – ‘Jar nai jatkul/ Se jay Kansai kul’ meaning ‘those who neither have caste nor lineage, go to the bank of Kansabati’ – is suggestive of their apprehensions regarding caste. Thus, many children were born out of inter-caste marriage and unsanctioned sexual union. In Indian society (as in most societies across the world), the father’s surname/family name become the surname of the children, and thus one comes across in Jeter society many people with ‘Brahmin’ surnames [such as ‘Pahari’ ‘Mishra’, ‘Rathbatul’ (‘Rath’ being the surname of the Brahmin father and Batul that of the lower caste mother)], some ‘Mahishya’ surnames (such as ‘Maity’, ‘Giri’), some ‘Sodgop’ surnames (such as ‘Ghosh’), some ‘Bhumij’ surnames (such as ‘Sing’, ‘Batul’) along with their traditional pre-modern surnames such as ‘Mahar’, ‘Ghorai’, ‘Sing’, etc. The prevalence of the surname ‘Sing’ is a clear indication that some Jeters were born out of sexual union of Adivasi (especially Munda and Bhumij) men with the surname ‘Sing’ and low-caste women. However, in the eyes of mainstream society this mixed people were ‘excluded from’ caste and hence the term ‘Jeter/Jatord’, literally meaning ‘excluded from caste’, designate a community of people who are presumably born out of unsanctioned sexual union. De (2017) refers the name of an eminent scholar Dr. Khudiram Das (henceforth Das) who has said that the word ‘Jeter’ comprises two components—the Bengali word ‘Jat’ meaning ‘caste’ and the Santali word ‘ord’ meaning ‘punished’. Taken together they mean ‘communities punished/excluded from caste’. Das has also said that the second etymological component of the word ‘tord’ is ‘water current’. Thus, on the basis of this latter etymological meaning, and also on

the basis of a popular myth of their origination from water, one meaning of the word 'Jator/Jatord' is caste people who are 'borne by water current'.

Identity Turmoil

If the experiences of untouchability, spatial exclusion, regression, humiliation, discrimination, lack of rudimentary education, dispossession of land, violation of human rights, etc., are the markers for being a 'caste community', the 'unevenly accepted' community named Jetor, who may be designated as a particularly vulnerable, hyphenated, interstitial (between tribe and caste) group, more than qualifies for the denomination. The trajectory of the 'historic achievements' of Shudras and Ati-Shudra caste movements in the colonial period, and the curve of the growth of democracy in India after Independence, that has led to the mobilization and emancipation of many marginalized groups in modern Indian society, has barely touched the Jetors. They remain as a historically disadvantaged segment despite the "historical lead" of the Dalits towards liberal democracy (Guru, 2004, p. 31). Notwithstanding the movements of E. V. Ramasamy for a section of the Dravids (Kazhagam), Narayana Guru for the Ezhava community, the Satnami movement for the Chamaras (Aiyappan, 1943, p. 390; Samuel, 1973), Mulayam Singh Yadav for the Yadavs, Kanshi Ram for the 'Bahujans' and so on, the Jetors, who are incapable of articulating their 'voice', remain 'invisible' and 'neglected'. This is reminiscent of Dr. Ambedkar's apprehensions about whether the equality and dignity promised in the Constitution would be extended "to all", and whether the "social climate would enable such a non-discriminatory situation to actually emerge" (Channa & Mencher, 2013). The condition of the Jetors is a pointer that Dr. Ambedkar's "apprehensions" were justified. Like the erstwhile Criminal Tribes (CT), the Jetors continue to be 'branded' as 'pilferers', and as people whose contact is 'polluting'. Completely devoid of land-rights (Jetors do not have even a small piece of land of their own, and they live on unclaimed, vest lands located on the side of water bodies) and legal protection against eviction, they live in the marginalized spaces which were once the ground reserved for dumping the carcass of domestic animals of the zamindars. In India rules of purity and pollution are not only socio-cultural and political, but also 'spatial'. This spatial exclusion is fatal to Indian society because during the colonial regime the "segmented territories" played a critical role in dividing Indian society into "the touchables" and "the untouchables" (Cháirez, 2014, pp. 37–50) much to the detriment of nationalism and continuance of the practice of untouchability. It is in the socio-spatial contexts that "disadvantages of caste-discrimination are internalized" in the structures of power (Patel, 2022, pp. 186–198). Though the majority of the Jetors are now spatially 'settled down' in unclaimed fallow lands away from the nerve-centre of the villages, semi-nomadic tendencies are still prevalent among them. For example, they set out for distant places in search of work, and settle down at the new place leaving the previous hut, if the work facility is better at the new place. To date, many Jetor young men settle in their in-law's house leaving their paternal home. However, after Independence, they could

not make their voices heard to obtain the status of either 'tribe' or 'caste' or PVTG or any status whatsoever. One ironic continuity between the colonial and postcolonial policy framing is that both the governments were reluctant to confer any 'status' upon a community not "organized". For example, the British government declared (in 1871, 1876, 1911 in North India, Bengal Presidency and Madras Presidency respectively) such communities as 'criminal' as were "highly organized" and "trained in crime". Moreover, that the process of inclusion of a community under CT Act was erratic is proved by the fact that the Lodhas were not included under the CT category in 1876. They were brought under its purview only in 1911, probably by the empowered local administration (Guha, 2016, p. 75). This proves that there were chances of a community being left out. In all probability, the Jetors were one such missed out in-between community. Post Independence, 153 communities were recategorized as DNT and no less than seven censuses (1951, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011) have been conducted, but the Jetors have remained unaccounted. Needless to say, they are still deprived of the 'status' they 'deserve', and live a terrible kind of life socially away from both the upper caste Hindu people, and the tribal communities who do not establish any marital relationship with them. Usually, it is found that spatially they are adjacent to the Adivasi (aboriginal) localities, but they are farthest from the dominant castes in terms of space and cultural reciprocity. Consignment of the Jetors to a 'rung' below that of the 'ati-shudras' (also called 'avarnas') in the social ladder, is indicated by the fact that in olden times the former were considered 'too low-born' to be allowed to enter the precincts for household jobs, while the latter could serve the dominant Hindu society by doing menial jobs. What the upper caste Hindu people loathed most about the Jetors is their old habit of eating meat of 'dead' goat, ram, hen, etc. In olden times they could hardly afford to purchase meat and if they came across any 'eatable' dead domestic animals they would eat that forgetting if that was edible or not. What mattered most to them is the taste of the food, and they were little concerned about the safety of food. The Jetors live in small tottering huts (Table 1) 'outside' the nerve-centre of the caste Hindu. They are the dregs of what the scholars of Dalit studies variously call the 'ati-Shudras' who, as an "invention" in Indian society, have come into existence out of the intermingling of the Aryans and the aborigines of post-Harappa civilization (Brough, 1959, pp. 69–85; Lincon, 1981; Kosambi, 1956, pp. 94–95). The formations of the 'ati-Shudras' caste may be traced to the evolutions of clans, *Gotras* (a Sanskrit word broadly meaning 'clan', and referring to people belonging to a line of descendants), and the observance of the principles of endogamy and exogamy. According to Anastasia Piliavsky, they are not a "colonial making", and drawing on pre-colonial descriptions of robber castes (in ancient legal texts, folktales, Jain, Buddhists and Brahminic narratives, Mughal sources, Early Modern travel accounts) she has argued that the idea of castes of congenital robbers was a label that predates the colonial rule and has indigenous roots (2015, pp. 323–354). Dr. Ambedkar has said whether the caste people were Aryans, or aboriginal inhabitants of India, or tribes produced by the union of the Aryans with the other, is of little consequence. At an

early period they were placed in a class by themselves, and received the “fourth” rank and were at a considerable distance from the three superior classes/castes (2020, p. 3).

Table 1: Status of Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), a housing project of the Government of India, in select Jetor villages in the District of Paschim Medinipur

Name of the Village	Total Jetor Families	Total Jetor Population	Total Jetor Families Availing IAY	Percentage of Families Availing IAY
Bhatpara	170	750	90	52.94
Budra	44	135	7	15.91
Desonda	82	303	25	30.49
Banstala	76	240	10	13.16
Sarpal	47	191	15	31.91
Wallipur	25	60	9	36.00

Source: Author’s computations based on field survey

Referring to the prefix ‘ati’ (meaning ‘extra’) in the term ‘ati-Shudra’ used by Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar among others, it may be said that the Jetors comprise a particularly vulnerable, interstitial, hyphenated group who share the characteristics of both the tribals and the untouchables, and who are not required (hence ‘extra’) in a seemingly complete essentialized structure in society. They are not accommodated in the framework of the pan-Indian movement for the Dalits, a caste/class-category¹ that has emerged as an essentialized group assured of no further inclusion of competing marginalized groups in the category they belong to, unless there is a major amendment of the Indian Constitution. The claim of the Dalit political discourse that it has produced a concrete alternative to the mainstream nationalist formulations seems to be ironical when one thinks of the hyphenated community like the Jetors who have ‘failed’ to prove their numerical strength. The question regarding who would be treated as ‘tribe’ or ‘caste’ or ‘PVTG’, etc., is largely determined by such ‘qualifications’ as being large in number, well organized, led by a person of relative political power, ‘presence’ in the electoral roll, etc., but the Jetors, who have ‘failed’ to fulfil all these criteria, are ‘outside’, ‘excluded’, and are ‘hyphenated’ till the present times. Sometimes a hyphen is inserted between the root word and the prefix, and the hyphen is sometimes used, and sometimes done away with because a blank space may serve the purpose of the hyphen. What the hyphen is to a compound word, the Jetors are to Indian society. Their primitive habit of collecting daily essentials from jungle and river, their geographic isolation, low literacy, declining population, their umbilical connection with river and forest, their deep understanding of the ecology of the region, etc., align them with the tribals, while their marginalization and humiliation on the basis of their ‘low birth’ and ‘low caste’ align them with the untouchables. Hence, they

¹S. Kumar et al in their article “Determinants of Social Mobility in India” (published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(29), 2983-2987) have established a direct correlation between caste and class.

may be designated a hyphenated vulnerable community belonging to the interstitial space. There is little doubt that they are more vulnerable and marginalized than either the Dalits or the tribals. This is evident from the locations they have been forced to live in, which are on the edges of either rivers or water-bodies or jungles. This reminds us of Dr. Ambedkar's use of the term *Antyaja* for the untouchables. They are the true *Antyaja* in the sense of how Dr. Ambedkar used it. They still live on the edges of the villages situated on the banks of the river Subarnarekha and Kangsabati or beside a canal or a water body. Lost in the vortex of identity politics, loathed by the upper caste people, avoided by the scheduled tribes (ST), and excluded by the Dalit activists from the purview of the movement for social justice, the Jetors, who have been living incognito, are not only critically endangered, but also 'outside' the framework of the Dalit movement, which, leaving its less fortunate and hitherto unrecognized fraternity, is quick to include the tribal people in its fold with a view to expanding its limits. For example, Stephen Christopher has argued in favour of including the Gaddi tribe of Himachal Pradesh in the 'Dalit' category (2020, p. 7). Sharankumar Limbale also has argued in favour of including the denotified tribes in the Dalit fold (Acharya and Roy, 2024, p. 1). They even remain sidelined in the recent political programs undertaken by the government. For example, the government of West Bengal has introduced a politico-social programme, 'Duare Sarkar' (government at the doorway), but unfortunately many of their problems (especially their appeal for identity status) remain unresolved in successive 'Duare Sarkar' sessions.

Problem of Surname

Pitted against abject poverty, humiliation, social stigmatization, and exclusion on the basis of caste and lowbirth, many Jetors are languishing on account of their 'General Caste surnames'. The most common surnames in their society are 'Maity', 'Mahar', 'Ghorai', 'Pahari', 'Batul', 'Mandol', 'Giri', etc., and other surnames are 'Misra', 'Sing', 'Rana', 'Rathbatul', 'Pakhira', 'Patar', 'Bhunia', 'Barik', 'Kapat', 'Paloi', etc. Among the surnames mentioned above there include 'Brahmin' surnames, 'Mahishya' surnames, 'Sodgop' surnames, 'Bhumij' surnames and more. With the Mundas and Bhumij people they share the surname 'Sing' and with the Brahmins 'Pahari' and 'Mishra'. Numerous Jetor carry the Brahmin surname 'Pahari', though they have neither similarity nor social relationship with the Brahmins. In terms of social hierarchy they are farthest from the Brahmins. The debated question as to how they obtained the Brahmin surname demands further anthropological research, but from what De and senior Jetors have hinted at are suggestive of unsanctioned sexual relation and reproduction between people of different ethnic groups. The presence of the Mahishya surname 'Maity' is also ascribable to the same ethnic immixture. It is because of their upper caste surnames that they are facing problems regarding the conferment of identity status that they most deserve and want. If they are asked as to what they want most, they will invariably say 'Jati Certificate' (caste certificate). Even the elderly have not been able to explain how such surnames as are most unbecoming

of and incompatible with their birth status and social standing came to be there. Many of the physiognomic and morphological attributes of the Jetors bear the imprints of intermixing. The exact physical identity of the Jetors still awaits research. Usually, it is held that the physical features and morphological structure of the Jetors bear physical resemblance to the common Bengali people as well as the aborigines of the adjoining areas. One will come across some Jetor people who are dark brown in skin colour while some are fair. The Jetors are wedged inbetween the 'opposites'—the 'people belonging to caste category' and the people of the 'general category'. In the eyes of the upper caste as well as the aboriginal people, the Jetors are 'excluded from caste' and are 'different'. Both sections consider the Jetors to be 'lower' in terms of caste and birth. They are thought to have been suffering on account of their 'Karma', a scriptural notion in India. Barring a few exceptions only in recent times, it is not possible to identify a single upper caste family, and a single 'Adivasi' family willingly entering into marital relationship with the Jetors. To date, it is an accepted fact that a young man belonging to the family of the 'Mahar' or 'Maity' or 'Pahari' or 'Ghorai' or 'Mandol' or 'Batul' will marry a girl hailing from another Jetor family identified by the senior members of their community. In fact, the denomination 'Jetur' which the Jetor people accept only half-heartedly (the young generation in Jetor community do not like the denomination at all because it smacks of social stigma) was invented either by the elderly members of the Jetor community or by the so called 'upper caste' people who considered them to be their social 'inferiors'. Thus, it is a matter of regret that while the nation prepares to celebrate the seventy-eighth year of independence, a community that has suffered centuries of neglect and humiliation, remains 'undocumented' and 'unidentified' by the government. Despite repeated attempts to apply for recognition, government officials ask them to provide 'chain deeds' in support of their claim. Some are also asked to explain their surnames while others say that they belong to General Caste. Thus, the Jetors are caught in a kind of hyphenated state. The General Caste people do not consider the Jetors to belong to their category and maintain a great social distance from the Jetors whom they consider to be of 'low birth'. The aboriginal peoples, who have been endowed ST status since the Indian constitution came into force, too consider the Jetors to be 'different'. Thus, the Jetor people suffer a kind of liminal condition. Pitted against the fact that neither the caste Hindus nor the people belonging to traditional faiths 'accept' them whole-heartedly, some Jetors have begun to attend Christian prayers in recent times (for example, in Bhatpara village of Paschim Medinipur). Elderly persons of their community opine that in future they may cease to exist as a distinct community, and their ethnic name may be erased altogether. Dispossession of land is a crucial problem in their society. After a discussion with the local Panchayats, it emerged that Jetors do not have any valid land deed where they have built their huts, and the condition of their huts and precincts beggar description. Most of the walls are either *Chhitabera* or polythene draped. Rooftops are perforated. A majority of them have not been able to avail themselves of Indira Awas Yojana. Thus, with their identity under threat, they are the most vulnerable of the ethnic communities of Jangal Mahal. Theirs is a pre-colonial, semi-nomadic indigenous life

based on cattle-grazing and cattle-raising, collecting food from the river and jungle (Table 4), collecting, and selling grass, etc. They have close attachment to ancestral territories—their imagined or real ‘homeland’ left behind forever. Jetors still try to cling to their ancestral practice of worship of gods and goddesses not by any Brahmin hired from outside, but by their own priest. The ancestors of the Jetors were ‘Bajondars’ (drummers and players of air instruments) and broom makers, and to date many Jetors still cling to these two professions.

Demographic Features

Table 2: Salient demographic features in the district of Paschim Medinipur

Name of the Jeter locality	If people other than the Jeters live in the locality	Urban/ Semi-urban/ Rural	Name of the water body near which they live	Total number of Jeter families	Jeter Surnames	Total Jeter population in the locality	Population per family
	(yes/no)					(tentative)	
Amda, P.S. – Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	35	Pahari, Mandol, Mahar, Ghorai,	83	2.371429
Banstala (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	76	Pahari, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Mandol, Ghorai, Sing, Pakhira	240	3.157895
Barbetia, (School Math) P.S. – Kharagpur	Yes	Urban	The Canal	20	Ghorai, Mahar, Maity, Pahari	80	4
Bhatpara, P.S. -Gurguripal	No	Rural	Kangsabati river	170	Ghorai, Maity, Pahari, Pakhira, Mandol, Kapat	750	4.411765
Bhasra, P.S. - Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha river	13	Maity , Mahar	43	3.307692
Bidhannagar, P.S.- Kharagpur	Yes	Urban	No such water body	3	Mahar	12	4
Budra, P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	44	Pahari, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Mandol, Ghorai	135	3.068182
Canal Pard (Panachhatra), P.S. - Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The Canal	20	Ghorai, Mandol, Giri, Bhunia, Rana, Sing	95	4.75
Desonda, P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Semi-Urban	Kangsabati river	82	Ghorai, Batul, Mahar, Mandol, Maity	303	3.695122
DeuliMadhyo, P.S. – Belda	Yes	Semi-urban	Marshy land	14	Mahar, Sing, Ghorai	52	3.714286
Dherua, P.S.- Gurguripal	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	24	Maity, Mahar, Ghorai	101	4.208333
Dokhondiha P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	7	(Rath)Batul, Ghorai, Mahar	19	2.714286

Gangadharchak (Panachhatra), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The Canal and marshy land	4	Mandol, Maity, Sing	18	4.5
Goaldanga, P.S. – Gurguripal	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	65	Maity, Ghorai	260	4
Giripara (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	22	Mandol, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Ghorai, Pakhira	85	3.863636
Gonsorisha P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	18	Pahari, Mahar	84	4.666667
Kalamatia P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	55	Mahar, Ghorai	240	4.363636
Kandramari P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	55	Mukhi, Mahar, Batul, Patar	242	4.4
Karanji Mura P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	29	Mahar, Batul, Ghorai	97	3.344828
Khaspara (Pannachhatra) P.S. - Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The Canal	9	Maity, Barik, Sing, Kuilya, Mahar	50	5.555556
Mandalpara (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	17	Mandol, Maity, Ghorai	54	3.176471
Nepura, P.S. – Gurguripal	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	2	Maity	8	4
Palasia P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	7	Batul, Mahar	35	5
Ranapatna (Sirshi), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The natural ditch	15	Mahar, Ghorai, Patar	60	4
Rupnarayanpur (Desonda), P.S.- Kharagpur Local	Yes	Semi-urban	Kangsabati river	58	Ghorai, Mahar	220	3.793103
Sarpal, (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	47	Pahari, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Mandol, Ghorai, Sing, Pakhira	191	4.06383
Walipur, P.S.- Kharagpur	Yes	Rural	Mora Kansai (One stagnant branch of Kangsabati river)	25	Mandol, Batul, Sing, Ghorai, Pakhira	60	2.4
Total population= 3617							
# Male female ratio = 91:100 (obtained from field survey data).							

Source: Author's computation based on field survey

All the settlements (Table 2) are located either on the riverbank or near a canal or water body. Women are very active in Jetor society, more so than the men in the observance of religious ceremonies, daily life and decision making. Numerous Jetor man are addicted to alcohol, and die early. As a result, middle-aged widowed women in their forties are found in great numbers. They are able-bodied, working women who do not remarry and remain separately in the same household as shared by their son's family. In Jetor society boys and girls marry early in life and immediately after marriage cook separately. One will come across very few families where the parents and their married children remain in a joint family. Another practice is of *ghor-jami* (in standard Bangla the word *ghor-jamai* denotes 'son-in-law staying in his wife's parental home'). After marriage the son-in-law thinks it wise to stay at the in-law's

house permanently. One remarkable demographic feature of their society is that the number of females is slightly greater than the number of male (Table 3). Sustained and full-fledged census work is required to state anything decisively regarding the male-female ratio in their society, but the initial field research and the data of a sample locality given below bears out the above statement.

Table 3: Number of male and female in the sample Jetor locality named Sarpal

Total Number of Families (in Sarpal)	Total Population in the Locality	Male	Female
47	191	91	100

Source: Author’s computation based on field survey

Jetors welcome the birth of girls as much as they welcome the birth of boys because in their society women can do all sorts of work including cultivation work in the field and managing the household. The presence of impaired or differently-abled children in their society is alarming. Poor health and hygienic conditions and poor standard of nutrition are the chief reasons behind the birth of babies with congenital problems. Parents prefer three to four children on an average, as they are unsure about how many would survive. Income levels in their society are very poor and far below the normal standard in Indian society. Women earn more than men in such families where the male members are alcoholic. Most of the time the alcoholic male remains ill or indisposed, and the woman is aware that her family will starve if she does not remain at the helm. One will find innumerable girls between the age group of 13-17 married before they have attained the official age of marriage. Teen pregnancies exist, with many girls giving birth at the age of fifteen or sixteen. In some cases it is difficult to differentiate the mother-in-law (who was offered in marriage at a very early age) from the daughter-in-law (who got married at a later age). When asked about their origin most people say that their parents migrated from the ‘West’ (‘Paschim’). The data in the following table bears proof to their origination from the south-west parts of India.

Table 4:Ancestral places of migration

Name of the Ancestral Place	District	State	Location
Baripada	Mayurbhanj	Orissa	South-Western
Nilgiri ¹⁰	Baleshwar	Orissa	South-Western
Rohini	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Dhobasol	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Fekoghat	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Chinchira	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Sankrile	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Kultikri	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Beliabera	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western

Gopiballabpur	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Jamboni	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Lalgarh	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Sardiha	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Khas Jangal	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Manikpara	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Khalsiuli	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Rautrapur	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Chubka	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Dumuria	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Baharagora	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Parulia	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Jagannathpur	West Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Kumardhubi	Dhanbad	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Barasol	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Bena Kuri	Pakur	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Domjuri	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western

Source: Author's field survey

The table as well as personal interviews (at the time of field visit) with senior persons of the Jetor community reveal that their ethnic origin is south-west India, and a section of them are most probably the progenitors of the 'Mahars' who, having suffered centuries of neglect and humiliation, adopted the path of *Satyagraha* at Jawhar Lake. De also is of the same opinion in his book mentioned in this article. The widespread Jetor surname 'Mahar' is particularly indicative of migration of a section of theirs in the distant past from the state of Maharashtra where the 'Mahar'(s) are found in great numbers. Educationally, they are backward, with 9 out of 10 people in their society illiterate. It is challenging to find a graduate in a Jetor village, and if one or two are found, they languish in jobless conditions. It is for the mid-day meal that many Jetor children are sent to school nowadays. The dropout rate of the Jetor school-going children at the primary level is on the wane, but very few qualify to the Madhyamik level. The presence of customary socio-legal institutions and practices in Jetor community bear proof to their indigeneity. For example, to date they have a 'Mukhya' or 'Mukhia', an elderly person well versed in community laws and customs. There are specific laws to be implemented if a member violates the codes and customs commonly practised. Such a practice is the practice of marriage. Marriage law is very stringent. Usually the Jetors marry within their community, and an outsider has to go through the traditional process of *jatetola* (a ritual in which the newcomer has to eat a piece of cooked rice lifted from the rice dish/leaf of each of the invited members of their community, while they are eating), if he or she is to be accepted as a caste member.

Earnings and Sustenance

Making brooms from the leaves and branches (*Khejurpali*) of date palm and selling them in the local market is their ancestral profession and main source of income. Both men and women specialize in this work because they have been doing it generationally. Women are as skilled as men in this work, and travel to distant places with family and community members to collect date palm leaves. The Jetors are experts on how to collect branches without damaging the growth of the trees. The entire process takes place without the use of any material that may cause an environmental hazard. At present, some use plastic rope to tie the brooms—a practice not compatible with their work ethic. Jetors depend on the forest and river produce to a great extent and it is an ancient practice they still cling to. Women, like men, go out for *namal*, a culture-specific word meaning ‘going to distant places during cultivation season for earning wages by rendering manual labour in the fields of persons who have land’. This mass exodus from the Jetor villages will be apparent if one happens to visit their localities in the cultivation season. The villages look deserted at that time. The places they travel to under the leadership of middle-men or labour-contractors, are Egra, Pataspur, Balighai, Satmile, Bajkul, Paniparul, Ramnagar, Digha, etc. Sometimes women receive fewer amounts as wages than their male counterparts despite rendering equal amounts of work. In most instances this happens because of the interference of ‘middle men’. They also work in local farmer’s house and earn some amount of money. In olden times they would receive rice and other daily essentials instead of money from their employer as wages for rendering manual labour or for tending cattle. As a Bajondar community (drummers) they earn by playing the Dhol, Chercheri, Kurfa, Side Drum, Sanai (clarinet), various types of flute and other musical instruments at religious and social festivals. This profession gives them the scope to come in contact with the upper caste people. It is noticeable that many Jetors have formed musical bands and *Horinam Sankirtan* groups. These groups are invited by the government as well as private organizers of social functions for performances. Many Jetor men (especially in Galdanga and Dherua) cross-dress as *Sokhi*-artists and professionally perform Chou-dance. Still now several Jetor women earn their livelihood by doing midwifery jobs—another work they have done generationally. Jetor women used to do midwifery work at a time when nurses and hospital facilities were scarce. Since the Jetors live by the riverside, they rely a lot for livelihood on the Kashicotton (obtained from thatch grass) and Kashis stems (reeds of thatch grass), with which *chanch* (a kind of mat) is made. The reeds are woven into a *chanch*, which is sold either in the local market or at door steps for a meagre amount. With Kashi cotton they make pillows and thread. Jetors used to tend the cattle of those who were well-off in the village. Now they raise cows, goats, hens, etc., on their own. Only a few of the Jetors work in low-paying, small sand-mining, sponge-iron, metal industries located in the Kharagpur industrial belt. They are also engaged in activities like street vending, recycling, small-scale manufacturing, etc.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is evident that the Jetors are victims of multiple forms of human rights violation and are caught at the intersection of an oppressive network of institutions. They are hardly emancipated at the level of the psyche from the feudal oppression of upper caste Hindu society. The indignities their ancestors suffered historically have induced in them a fear psychosis and inferiority complex from which they have hardly freed themselves even today. Though caste atrocity is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden legally, it is still present in Indian society as a subterranean flow (Rao, 1966, p. 298). The issue of untouchability formed a nexus in colonial times with the question of ‘crime as profession’ and their stigmatization as ‘criminal at birth’. This factor along with other humiliating factors existing in the stratified Indian society for long pushed a section of the caste people toward a ‘limbo state’. There neither exists any document to prove that the Jetors belonged to the Criminal Tribes (CT) nor any mention of their clan name in a list of Denotified Tribes (DNT) published by the Government of India, but private interviews with the senior Jetor people as well as with aged persons of the villages adjoining the Jetor villages reveal the fact that in the past they were forced to resort to crimes, especially pilferage during hard times for survival. Another besetting problem is ‘land’. As mentioned earlier, the land department harasses them by asking them to submit ‘chain deeds of land’ if they want to procure a caste certificate. This sordid fact is not only a sheer mockery of the agrarian reforms, but also a pointer to the relation between land-dispossession and caste system. Indeed, they are critically dispossessed of land rights—a phenomenon that, according to Dr. Ambedkar, forms the “material basis” of untouchability and determines “social status” (Guha, 2023, p. 7). Jetors had settled in very small pieces of vest lands on which they did not have any claim and from which they could not earn livelihood. The landed people sometimes question their land rights, and threaten to evict them. This has resulted in their forced relocation to different places. They are also exploited in the neighbouring industrial parks which have the potency to help those who are dispossessed of land (Kumar, 2020, pp. 37-56). Because of their lack of education and technical learning, they are offered no substantive jobs in the factories of TATA Metaliks Pvt. Ltd., Rashmi and Co. and other industries. Since the Jetors are settled on the banks of Kangsabati and Subarnarekha, two major illegal sand-mining fields, they are availed of as labourers, a fact that involves them in police harassment, though they do not belong to the structures responsible for illegal sand-mining.

Thus, caught in a vicious cycle and unable to articulate themselves, the Jetors comprise a highly vulnerable community whose identity, language, culture, etc., are in jeopardy. Their complaint to the survey team is, “Nobody looks at us.” This is not a casual comment, but is suggestive of centuries of neglect and humiliation that has

left an indelible mark on their psyche, and has rendered them ‘excluded’ in the eyes of administration. Their other complaint is about ‘folk artist’s allowance’ and ‘old age allowance’, of which many are deprived. The government of West Bengal has extended *silpibhata* (allowance for the artists) to some of them, but many folk artists [drummers like Dhaki, Dhuli, Checheri players, side-drum players, big-drum players, Sri Khol players; Sinai (clarinet) player, Kirtonias, flute players, percussion instrument players, folk singers, Sokhi-artists, performers participating in folk *Palagan* and others] still remain deprived. Jetors struggle with housing, with many having failed to avail themselves of the housing schemes of the government of India. Addiction and cheap wine consumption is eating into their vitals. The Jetor youth is getting deranged because of this habit of drinking cheap wine. Not a single Jetor family has availed of any health scheme facility offered by the government of India, though they are the most vulnerable to diseases. There are some Jetor families in which the members eat once a day on account of poverty. This happens during the dull seasons when they earn nothing and cannot beg. It is high time we ‘speak’ for the Jetors and take initiatives for their documentation as a community. The government may take such steps as would enable the Jetors to involve themselves in training and other reciprocal activities. Revitalization and preservation is required to resist their erasure. They deserve special attention with regard to the facilities to be extended from the government. If the caste reservation facility or PVTG status is to be extended through policy decision to any community in India, it should be the interstitial and hyphenated Jetor people, a community rendered ‘faceless’.

Disclaimer

A different version of this article has been accepted in another journal of repute for publication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

There are no such potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Though there is involvement of many Jetor people who have kindly talked and given access to their precincts, the article reveals no personal information and does not compromise on the question of research ethics.

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