

Claiming Identity: The Politics of Surnames and the Demand for Scheduled Caste Reservation among the Nishads in Uttar Pradesh

Narendra Singh

(Narendra Singh is an independent researcher who has completed his doctoral research in Sociology at Central University of Haryana Mahendergarh, Haryana, India)

Abstract

This article examines the socio-political mobilization of the Nishad community in Uttar Pradesh in their pursuit of Scheduled Caste (SC) reservation. It investigates the strategies and tools employed by caste associations, the Nishad Party, and independent community leaders, focusing particularly on the symbolic and political significance of shifting surnames—from Mallah to Verma, Verma to Nishad, and Nishad to Manjhar—as a tactical claim to SC status. The article argues that SC reservation is not only perceived as a route to social mobility but also functions as a political instrument to consolidate caste identity and community mobilization. The study further contextualizes these developments within broader structural transformations, including the impact of globalization, environmental degradation, and declining riverine resources, which have collectively undermined traditional livelihoods and compelled the community to seek new forms of economic mobility. Additionally, it highlights how the historical misclassification of the Nishads—from a tribal to an Other Backward Class (OBC) category—has limited their political representation and intensified their marginalization in the face of dominant upper-OBC groups. Drawing on ethnographic research, this study critically engages with the implications of caste reclassification and the grassroots strategies adopted by the community in navigating state structures and identity politics.

Keywords: (MALLAH, NISHAD, IDENTITY POLITICS, SOCIAL MOBILITY, SCHEDULE CASTE RESERVATION)

Introduction

On 21st June 2018, the Nishad Jagriti Sewa Sangharsh Samiti of Firozabad district, Uttar Pradesh, submitted a memorandum to the Tehsildar, raising concerns that members of the Mallah, Manjhi, and Kewat castes were being denied Scheduled Caste certificates (Sharma 2018). The Samiti argued that these castes are synonymous with the *Manjhar* community, which is listed as a Scheduled Caste (SC) in Uttar Pradesh, and therefore, they should rightfully receive SC status and associated benefits. The lack of proper caste certification has had serious implications, particularly for students whose admissions to colleges and universities were either delayed or cancelled due to the inability to furnish SC certificates. As the Nishad (Mallah) community is spread across several Indian states and union territories and comprises various sub-castes, including Nishad, Kewat, Mallah, Bind, Batham, Goriya, Tiyaar, and Manjhi, among others. The Nishad community in Uttar Pradesh's Firozabad district resides in close proximity to the river, with their villages located between 500 meters to 1.5 kilometers from its banks. This nearness has historically made the river a central source of livelihood for them (Singh and Khamniungan 2024). As the livelihood of the

community has been diminished due to the pollution, developmental project over the river, introduction of railways, bridge construction over the river and privatization of pond sand mining fishing has make it worst to earn livelihood from these resources (Khare 2021; Singh; 2021). Communities residing near rivers, seas, and other water bodies—such as the Ganga, Narmada, ponds, dams, and coastal areas—and dependent on riverine resources are facing immense challenges and are on the brink of migration (Doron 2013; Jassal 2001; Khare 2021; Perspective 2010; Singh 2022; Shrivastava 2023).

The community consists of several sub-castes such as Nishad, Kewat, Mallah, Bind, Batham, Bathwa, Sorahiya, Goriya, Godh, Dharak, Guriyari, Tiyaar, Tanwar, Khulwat, Kharbind, Turaha, Rayawar, Sahni, Kashyap, Kahar, Dhimar, Manjhi, Majhwar, and Lodh. Among these, the most prominent sub-castes are Nishad, Bind, Lodh, Kashyap, and Kewat (Narayan, 2009, p. 118). While the broader community is generally classified as Scheduled Caste (SC) in Delhi and West Bengal and as Other Backward Classes (OBC) in Uttar Pradesh, a few sub-castes such as Manjhi and Majhwar are recognized as Scheduled Castes within Uttar Pradesh. Despite this, the community remains among the most socio-economically and politically marginalized within the OBC category, burdened by historical stigma and geographical isolation (Bhukhya, 2021; Doron, 2013; 2014). As the community, in particular, carry the legacy of being designated as a 'criminal tribe' under the colonial-era Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which has led to their continued social exclusion and surveillance (Jassal, 2001; Nigam, 1990).

Compounding their marginalization is the community's complex trajectory of caste categorization—from tribal identities to caste-based classifications—which has significantly hindered their access to reservations and political representation. The dominance of upper OBC groups has further exacerbated their exclusion. In response, various segments of the community began to strategically redefine their identities, realizing that the stigma associated with being a 'criminal tribe' prevented them from accessing public spaces and opportunities. As a result, the community adopted the surname *Verma*, distancing themselves from their stigmatized past. With this change, the community began participating more actively in the democratic setup. Under the leadership of Raghuwar Dayal Verma, they won four consecutive assembly elections from Firozabad and later from the Shikohabad Vidhan Sabha constituency, successfully establishing a political foothold in the Firozabad district. Raghuwar Dayal Verma eventually became the forest minister in Kalyan Singh's government. Later, the community recognized the need to align themselves with a pan-Indian identity and began using the surname *Nishad*. However, when it became clear that this identity did not guarantee access to Scheduled Caste reservation, the community strategically shifted once again—this time to the surname *Manjhwar*. They began asserting that *Mallah*, *Nishad*, and *Kewat* are synonymous with *Manjhwar*, which is officially listed as a Scheduled Caste in Uttar Pradesh, thereby seeking SC reservation under that classification.

Method and Methodology

This study aims to explore the shifts in identity and strategy, analyzing how the Nishad community navigates the reservation framework as both a tool for socio-political assertion and a means of achieving upward mobility. This research is based on fieldwork conducted among the Nishad community in the

Firozabad district of Uttar Pradesh, with a particular focus on their efforts toward social mobility and political mobilization, especially in the Firozabad region of Western Uttar Pradesh. Ethnography was employed as the primary research methodology. Data was collected between February and July 2022 through interview schedules, participant observation, group discussions, and informal conversations with community members. Kabirpura village, located in the Usmanpur Panchayat, was selected as the main field site.

Use of mythologies and Efforts of the Caste Associations

Members of caste associations such as the National Association of Fishermen and the Nishad Jagriti Sewa Sangharsh Samiti, representing various sub-castes, have published books, magazines, and pamphlets. Through these publications, they assert that their historical figures—kings and freedom fighters—have not received the recognition and respect accorded to those from upper-caste backgrounds. So, by writing on the history of their notable persons, one of the primary reasons is to claim a respectful space. Like the case of Nishadraj Guhya¹, in his book "Kashyap Vansh ka Itihaas" (Kashyap 2014) states that King Guharaj Nishad ruled over Kangmerpur, with Shrangerpur serving as the capital of his empire. He possessed a substantial military force and a vast realm, and his offspring was treacherously slain by the Arya. King Guharaj engaged in battle with the Arya and emerged victorious. He also beat King Dashrath, who was the father of Lord Ram, on sixteen separate occasions. Due to Guharaj Nishad's Shudra status, historians did not accord him significant regard or attention. King Dashrath's recognition was attributed to his Kshatriya status. By making these efforts, they are trying to gain recognition and claim the status of kings, asserting that their king deserves respect as he was a friend of Lord Ram. Sukesh Nishad, a 54-year-old member of the NAF, mentioned,

Wherever the Bhagwat takes place, people are told that Nishad Raj drank water after washing Ramchandra's feet. These people insult the people of the Kashyap dynasty and our people are adhering to it.

The correction of the mythological story is not just intended for the purpose of producing stories of this nature, as authored by their intellectuals. Members of the caste organization and community leaders utilize it during meetings and in everyday interactions. Prem Singh Verma 65-year-old man shared a similar narrative, asserting that the Brahmins have inaccurately documented information about the community and our monarchs "Ram was a king, and Guharaj Nishad was also a king. Then why would King Guharaj Nishad wash his feet and drink water? These are all the lies the upper castes have spread and written in the Ramayana." Nishads are not dismissing the story of Lord Ram and Guharaj Nishad, as this relationship has now been proven. They want to utilize this story to emphasize that there was no distinction of social hierarchy in their friendship. The Guharaj victory over Lord Ram's father was used to showcase the bravery of their kings. These stories, as Kumar called them, *Gauravgathas*, changed over time and were used as per the needs of the time (Kumar, 2022, p. 56). In order to disseminate these narratives members of the Nishad

¹ The Nishad community's ruler, known as Nishadraj, is a prominent figure in the Ramayana and is revered as a significant mythical character.

community, caste associations have initiated the organization of Nishadraj Jayanti on April 5th annually. On this day, a grand procession was held, which visits every village inhabited by the Nishad community².

Associations mobilize community members in different platforms, disseminating their desired message and information. Radheshyam Verma, the 72-year-old man, association president mentioned, "We are organizing the celebration of Guharaj Nishad, and people from different communities are coming to participate. We are also using newspapers to inform people about the date and time, encouraging them to join us on that day". Despite its challenging nature, the introduction of social media has greatly assisted them. Using platforms like WhatsApp groups, Facebook, and phone calls, they send invitations in the form of pamphlets. These pamphlets mention the names of Phoolan Devi, Eklavya, and Nishadraj, and invite influential people such as MLAs, members of several panchayats, intellectuals, and other community members. Along with other communication platforms, social media has greatly facilitated their efforts. Doron argues, "These associations employ a number of techniques appropriate in a democracy, including disseminating information in local newspapers, organizing community events, mobilizing members to protest government actions and the production and financing of caste journals" (2013, p. 59). The National Association of Fisherman collected donations from members of the community, political leaders, businessmen, and members of the caste association³. The current headman and former headman of the panchayats, as well as the present MLA and former MLAs, also made generous contributions. Prior to the commencement of the program, the caste association initiated the planning and established a committee to oversee all tasks. By organizing these kinds of procession, the Nishad community came to know about the history of their kings and martyr and leaders. As Ramesh Nishad, a 51-year-old man mentioned,

By organizing this, we can know how powerful and prosperous we are. On all these occasions, we use the cap, scarf, and flag of the NAF. We also organized the aarti ceremony in honour of Nishad Raj during his Jayanti.

The phrase "we can know how powerful we are" reflects the community's intent to demonstrate its numerical strength to other castes and communities. This assertion not only aids in forging a collective identity under the name 'Nishad'—distancing themselves from historically stigmatized caste labels—but also serves as a strategic means to mobilize political support. It becomes an opportunity for the community to showcase the internal solidarity and growing support within, while also asserting their demographic presence at the district level. It helps the community to claim a position into the political sphere. Such processions instilled confidence within the community. Caste associations provided the community with a designated day, a deity to worship, and a protector figure. Further, they established a new space where community members could come together, discuss the issue of reservation and make strategy, and actively participate, with leaders representing them at various levels from grassroots to district levels. This space

² In April 2024, this procession reach to the villages; Sofipur, Totalpur, Nagla Sheikh, Nagla Daya, Nagla Chura, Katinari, Usmanpur, Kabirpura, Ramdaspora, Aladipura, Shankarpur, Madua, Ante Ki Madaiya, Kishorhaar, Basai Muhammadpur, Agarupura, Misiyapura, Bilahana, Nai Tor, Nagla Udi, Paharpur, Bargadpur, Datonji, Nagla Asha, Sujatgarh, Mehri Nagla <https://www.jagran.com/uttar-pradesh/firozabad-nishadraj-jayanti-17775238.html>

³ Earlier this procession is organized under the name of the Association but as due to mobilize the Nishad Kashyap and Lodhi into the Firozabad assembly they make a kind of the committee and that use to organized the meeting under the name of these three castes and trying to mobilize them.

evolved into a platform where the community's progress was assessed and discussed, and plans for the future were formulated. Importantly, it served as a vital link connecting every village within the community. As a result of these processions, villagers began mobilizing and becoming aware of their history, creating a space where the community used their new identity and familiarized with others. The strategy of organizing these processions has become an integral part of the community's identity—a stark departure from the earlier stigmatized and criminalized identity associated with being a Mallah—serving to disseminate and reinforce a new collective identity within the community. It also facilitates the political leaders of various political parties inside the community to establish a connection and create a hypothetical picture, promising that if we can come into power, we can restore the prosperity that existed during the reign of our king. Bhanwar Nishad leaders of the Nishad party⁴ shared,

Previously, the Nishad community in Agra and Firozabad adopted the surname 'Verma' due to their significant contributions to the country's freedom movement. When members of our community were imprisoned by the British in the Verma Jail of Paschimanchal in Agra, people began calling them 'Verma' upon their release. Recently, I learned from our leader, Sanjay Nishad, that we had a king in the past and that we are the rightful owners of 'Jal, Jangal, and Jameen' (water, forest, and land). During meetings of caste associations and the Nishad Party, the leadership often recalls that in earlier times—before airplanes and roads—people traveled by boat, and that the community once had its own king who ruled from a fort called Shrangeshwar. They claim that Indira Gandhi had even requested the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct an excavation at the site. They informed the government about a king named Nishad Raj Guha from ancient times. During that period, the country's economy thrived. When foreigners came to India and brought 3 INR, they received 1 INR in return, indicating that our country's economy was over three times better than it is now. However, numerous political parties have come to power since then, weakening the nation. If an Indian citizen travels to America, they have to pay 72 INR for one dollar, signifying that we are lagging behind them by 72 times.

Talking about prosperity during Nishadraj Guha's rule is an attempt to tell people that our (their) king and community was once very prosperous and we had the skills and experience to run it. It is a result of our efforts that the country's economy was 72 times better than under the current regime. As a result of these processions, villagers began mobilizing and becoming aware of their history.

Training, Traditions, and Power: The Political Journey of the Nishad Party

The Nishad Party was founded by Sanjay Nishad, who had received prior political training through his involvement with BAMCEF and the BSP. He learned techniques such as writing community literature and using deities and myths for mobilization. The party's leadership, particularly Sanjay Nishad himself, had previously been members of the BSP. Before that, they were associated with BAMCEF (All India Backward

⁴ Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal (NISHAD) is a political party in India. The party was established in 2016. The formation of the Nishad Party aims to strengthen the Nishad, Kewats, Bind, Beldar, Mallah, Sahani, Kashyap, Gond people, whose traditional livelihoods revolve around river-based occupations such as boatmen or fisherman. The founder of the organization is Sanjay Nishad, who formerly served as a member of the Bahun Samaj Party. He was affiliated with Kanshi Ram, the leader of the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), throughout the 1970s and 1980s. He previously organized a group of supporters for BAMCEF gatherings and served as a volunteer in Gorakhpur.

and Minority Communities Employees Federation), which had a strong presence in Uttar Pradesh. The Nishad Party leadership received political training from BAMCEF and actively participated in various committees, including the BAMCEF Cooperative, BAMCEF Adoption, BAMCEF Brotherhood, Literature Wing, Volunteer Team, and Medical Support and Advice Body (Narayan, 2014, p. 55). Learning how these Committees functioned by joining these Committees, Community leaders also acquired tools and strategies widely used by the BSP. These Committees worked to document the community's history through literature. A group of individuals were appointed to write this literature, and they also had folk singers who sang songs to raise awareness in the community. The songs highlighted the oppression of the community by the Brahmanical system and stressed the importance of using their vote and supporting the BSP to be a part of the system. Through these activities and the functioning of the Committees, the community leaders learned that by highlighting the rich history and kingdom of the community, a sense of pride and self-confidence can be instilled in the society, thereby countering the negative perception associated with criminal tribes.

These narratives, crafted by leaders and caste associations, possess emotional allure regardless of their affiliation with a certain political party, therefore precluding any criticism of said party. Typically, grassroots mobilization is a perpetual and ongoing process. In the 2019 general election, the Nishad party formed a coalition with the BJP. They are recognized for attracting and rallying people by emphasizing Hindu philosophy and narratives. In their dealings with the Nishad community, they have strategically employed the myth of Guharaj Nihsad to further their own goal. Further, the community itself takes advantage of this narrative whenever aligning with the BJP. The Nishad party forms a coalition with the BJP at both the central and state levels. Sanjay Nishad has also secured a position at Vidhan Parishad. In addition, he was appointed as the Minister of Fisheries in the Uttar Pradesh government. However, it instills faith within the community that their leaders are now in power, and that sooner or later, they will secure reservation. The party continues to run campaigns demanding Scheduled Caste status in Uttar Pradesh, while its top leadership is actively negotiating with both the state and central governments.

Conclusion

The Nishad community's struggle for Scheduled Caste reservation in Uttar Pradesh highlights how this cause has served as a powerful tool for political mobilization. It enabled the community to gain visibility and build the leverage needed to negotiate with both state and central governments. This struggle also underscores the intricate dynamics of caste, identity, and political assertion in contemporary India, particularly illustrating how lower OBC communities are reshaping political discourse by challenging not only upper-caste dominance but also the hegemony of upper OBCs. Through strategic shifts in surnames and self-identification—from Mallah to Verma, then Nishad, and now Manjhwari—the community has pursued both social recognition and access to the rights and entitlements reserved for Scheduled Castes.

These efforts by the community are not merely symbolic—they are deeply rooted in the pursuit of upward mobility, political representation, and social justice. They also contribute to the strengthening of democracy by reinforcing the belief among other castes and communities that democratic means can indeed be used to

achieve representation and access to power. While political parties and caste associations have, at times, instrumentalized this struggle, the community continues to engage with the reservation framework with resilience and hope. This movement plays a pivotal role in motivating other marginalized groups, encouraging them to seek education, economic upliftment, and social mobility. The community's mobilization around identity and historical narratives illustrates that, for the marginalized, the struggle is not only for material gains but also for restoring dignity and asserting a rightful place in society.

References

- [1] B. Bhukya, "Unveiling the World of the Nomadic Tribes and Denotified Tribes: An Introduction," *Economic and Political Weekly (Engage)*, vol. 56, no. 36, pp. 2–6, 2021.
- [2] A. Doron, *Life on the Ganga: Boatmen and the Ritual Economy of Banaras*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- [3] A. Doron, "The politics of Identity and the People Left Behind: The Mallah Community of Uttar Pradesh," in *Development Failure and Identity Politics in Uttar Pradesh*, R. Jeffery, C. Jeffrey, and L. Lerche, Eds. New Delhi: Sage, 2014, pp. 188–210.
- [4] S. T. Jassal, "Caste and the Colonial State: Mallahs in the Census," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 319–354, 2001.
- [5] S. Nigam, "Disciplining and Policing the Criminals by Birth, Part 1: The Making of a Colonial Stereotype—The Criminal Tribes and Castes of North India," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 131–164, 1990.
- [6] S. Kashyap, *Kashyap Vansh Ka Itihas*, 81st ed. Etah, Uttar Pradesh, India: Kashyap Printing Press, 2014.
- [7] S. Kumar, *Popular Democracy and the Politics of Caste: Rise of the Other Backward Classes in India*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2022.
- [8] S. Khare, "Narmada: Bargi Dam men na ke barabar rah gya machhali utpadan, machhuaaron ka buraa haal," [Narmada: Fish Production in the Bargi Dam has Reduced to almost Nothing, Fishermen are in a Dire Condition.] *Mongabay Hindi*, June 28, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://hindi.mongabay.com/2021/06/28/fishermen-struggle-for-livelihood-as-fish-production-in-bargi-dam-goes-down/>. [Accessed: Feb. 11, 2023].
- [9] B. Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2009.
- [10] B. Narayan, *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. UK: Penguin, 2014.
- [11] *Perspectives*, "Drought by Design: The Man-made Calamity in Bundelkhand," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 45, no. 5, pp. 33–38, 2010.

- [12] A. Sharma, "Anusuchit jaati mein shaamil karane ko lekar Nishad samaj ke logon ne uthaya ye kadam," [The Members of the Nishad Community Took this Step to be Included in the Scheduled Castes] *Patrika.com*, June 21, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.patrika.com/firozabad-news/nishad-samaj-demand-sc-reservation-2990390>. [Accessed: Jan. 22, 2025].
- [13] N. Singh and T. L. Khamniungan, "Yamuna River Pollution: Ethnographic Insights on the Impact on the Nishad Community," *Third Concept*, vol. 38, no. 448, pp. 56–58, 2024.
- [14] R. S. Singh, "Criminalization and Political Mobilization of Nomadic Tribes in Uttar Pradesh," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 56, no. 36, pp. 1–11, 2021.
- [15] A. Shrivastava, *Kachh Katha [Kachh Story]*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Publication, 2023.

