



Research Paper

The History of Caste in Nepal

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ABSTRACT : This paper discusses the history of caste in Nepal. In Nepal there are three prevalent caste systems namely the Newari caste system, the Parbatiya or the Hill caste system and the Madesh or Terai caste system. Prithivinarayan Shah of the kingdom of Gorkha unified the country to the Hindu state of Nepal. These three systems were unified into one contiguous system through the Muluki Ain (Country Code) of 1854.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Nepal, Muluki Ain (1854)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Religion has an integral role in Nepal's society. Dharma is the Nepali word for religion. The word contains multiple connotations, including duty, morality, rule, merit, ethics, and religious activities. In the context of Nepalese society, the term has a broader connotation than that of religion itself. Hinduism is an umbrella term for the numerous religious traditions practised in South Asia. Hinduism is an umbrella term for the numerous religious traditions practised in South Asia. Nepalese Hinduism contains remnants of Shamanism and other animistic rituals in addition to Brahmanism.

There has been a propensity to present the religious history of Nepal as tranquil, even though this is not the truth. Most of the ancient and mediaeval history has been recorded by Brahmanic intellectuals of high caste, who have not contributed to the most exhaustive and objective picture of Nepali history. Their documentation is constrained by the Gangetic Hindu worldview and is unresponsive to historical factors outside the Puranic tradition's overall scope. The numerous ethnic communities underwent a process of transition throughout the Lichhavi period, which was caused not only by the influence of the Gangetic Hindu viewpoint, but also by the strong economic and cultural linkages to Tibet.

The ancient Kiratas venerated Shiva. Pashupati, also known as Shree Pashupatinath, is a manifestation of Shiva. Pashupati signifies "Lord of the animals." He is venerated throughout the Hindu world, but particularly in Nepal, where he is informally considered a national deity. The Kiratas were the valley's earliest rulers. During the reign of the Kirat ruler Jitedasti, Gautama Buddha arrived in the valley accompanied by monks and merchants. According to tradition, the Kathmandu valley was originally a lake that the Bodhisattva Manjusrī drained by opening the southern cliffs and allowing the water to flow as the River Bagmati to the Indian plains. Buddhism, the first organised religion, was egalitarian in form and established in the valley.

The newly brought Hinduism by the Bahuns coexisted and cooperated with the previous shamanistic practises. There was no formal conversion process inside the hierarchical Hinduism or shamanism. In addition, they had no issues with the differences in the type of ritual practise. Spirit worship and spirit possession did not conflict with Hinduism. Blood sacrifice was consistent with both religious systems. The Hindu Bahuns thought that once people understood the divine origin of castes, everything would immediately fall into place. The Bahuns were mainly concerned with acquiring a small number of clientele who would use them for certain ceremonies and pay them dakshina (fees). The Shamans were unconcerned since the Bahuns did not completely steal their clientele, accepted the high status of the Shamans, and maintained their ritual distance from them. The worship of the ancestors in the form of the Kul Devata is another practise observed by many ethnic groups. Its devotion was an element of the ritual that the Brahmanic Hindus did not object to maintaining, and it was eventually included into the Nepalese Hindu system.

II. THE NEWARI CASTE SYSTEM

In the fifteenth century, under the reign of Kathmandu's Pratap Malla, the valley's inhabitants were known as the Newar. Newars speak Newari, a Tibeto-Burman language. The Kirats were superseded by the Lichhavi (Manusmriti: Nichchhavi) kings. The Lichhavi monarchs of Nepal encouraged the flourishing of both Buddhism and Hinduism. Manadeva was the first ruler of the Lichhavi dynasty. Caste was the most significant innovation introduced by the Lichhavis. Their inscriptions mention Brahmans, and Manadeva identifies himself as a pious Kshatriya. The Chandalas are likewise listed among the "eighteen castes," but neither the Vaisyas nor the Sudras are named. In 604 A.D., Amsuvarma decreed that all religious-related conflicts must be resolved by the royal court itself. This indicates that religious conflicts did exist and were severe enough to warrant the attention of the king.

The caste system in its conventional form was not firmly established for some time. The gausthikas, or guild-like organisation, is a noteworthy institution mentioned in the Lichhavi inscription. Several of these groups included individuals connected with tax collection, wrestling, lamp and incense manufacture, etc. In addition, there was one Brahman gausthikas. On this foundation, the Newar castes were later organised. The gausthikas were likely guilds with caste-like origins.

According to the Hindu scripture Manusmriti, Jayasthiti Malla (1385-1395) established a well-organized caste structure. He organised the caste system with the assistance of five Brahmans from India, namely Kirtinath Upadhyaya Kanyakubja, Raghunath Jha Maithili, Srinath Bhatta, and Ramnath Jha.

The majority of the population consisted of Mongoloids and non-Aryans; hence caste restrictions were not strictly adhered to. The second reason is that Buddhist influence precedes Brahmanical norms. People retained their previous practises of consuming buffalo meat and wine. Taleju Bhavani was an important Newar pantheon deity to whom buffalo flesh and drink were sacrificed. The Brahmins protested to the Tagadhari's consumption of meat and alcohol, but the people quit wearing the thread to worship their patron deity instead. The Brahmins sought political support for their superior position and insisted on implementing the caste system. Bista claims that the Bahun priests contributed to the legitimacy of the Malla dynasty by inventing a theory to show their Rajput ancestry. Yaksha Malla invited Brahmins from southern India to serve as priests at the Pashupati temple. By invoking Pashupati and Taleju, the Mallas established the legitimacy of their reign. He often referred to himself as Laksmi-Narayana, emphasising his dedication to Vaishnavism. Many Maithil Brahmins migrated from Tirhut to the Kathmandu valley, and the Newar Rajopadhyaya Brahmins trace their ancestry to them. In each of these methods, Newar kings distinguished themselves as non-local. Their right to govern stemmed from their ties to locations and deities in other parts of the subcontinent. This resulted in the growth of the caste system and a technique of population control.

According to Nepali, Newar society was split into four varnas and sixty-four castes "based on inherited occupations and lineages." Pancha Gauda, Pancha Dravida, and Jaisi were the three divisions of Brahmans. They were further separated into groups of Deva Brahmans and Bhatta Brahmans. In addition, there are the Jha and Tirhutiya Brahmans. The ruling Mallas were classified as Kshatriyas. Additionally, Buddhist Newars were divided into distinct castes. Buddhist Newars own their own equivalents. Vajracharya are at the top, similar to Brahmans, followed by Sakya, also known as Shakyabhikshu. Most of the the Kathmandu valley's population consisted of peasants, farmers, and bricklayers, who were referred to collectively as Jyapus. During the Malla era, these people were classified as Shudras, a low caste. The Japes have 32 subgroups, while another shudra group, the Kumhale (potters), only has four. The Kiratas were included among the sixty-four castes as one of the sixty-four hunting castes. Other Newar castes, such as the Sayami (oilers), Konal (incense makers), Dunim (carriers), and Kshatrakara (land-measurers), were derived from other gausthika. The Jyapus are further classified as "Sat-sudra" and "Asat-sudra," or Hindu and Buddhist Sudra, respectively. The untouchables consisted of butchers (Nay), fishermen (Po), sweepers (Chamkala), and leatherworkers (Kulu).

The acculturation process had persisted for centuries. Despite being separated as Hindus and Buddhists, the Newar developed shared characteristics. They were perhaps the first Tibeto-Burman speakers in the Himalayas to suffer a sociocultural transformation because of external caste dominance. The process that began in the fifth century CE accelerated with the passing of time. Prior to being overrun by the Gorkhas, the Newar culture existed as a small nation.

III. THE PARBATIYA OR HILL CASTE SYSTEM

The Bahun and Chettri families are known as Parbates (literally meaning mountain dwellers). The Khasas were of Indo-European descent and spoke an Aryan language. The name of their Indo-European language is Parbate or Khas Kura (Khas speech). Numerous individuals in Garhwal, Kumaon, and Nepal shared this name. Their economy was primarily based on pastoralism and animal husbandry, but they were otherwise identical to other hill tribes. According to one theory, because they were a non-Vedic Aryan group, they were referred to as degraded Kshatriyas. In actuality, the Manusmriti treated and characterised the Khas in the same manner as other Tibeto-Burmese-speaking Mongoloid races, including the Gurung, Magar, and other Kirat

groups. Khas and Kirat are listed together, along with Dravida, Darada, Shaka, etc., and are supposed to have attained a lower position for failing to observe the Brahmans' norms.

The Khasas intermarried with the indigenous Mongoloid residents and then with the high-caste Indo-Aryan migrants from the Indian plains. The majority of subsequent Khasas in western Nepal were indeed descended from such intermarriage. In the thirteenth century, Brahmanical influence was well established, and the Brahmins assisted local ruling dynasties in attaining Kshatriya status. The claim of the Kshatriya immigrants to be of Rajput descent is best understood 'in terms of a process, rather than the ancestry, true or fabricated, of specific dynasties' Ram Shah changed the title of the Gorkha monarchs from Khan to Sahi and eventually to Shah. Ram Shah created the first complete legal system based on Hindu concepts outside the valley.

Brahmanical Hinduism grew prevalent in the Nepal Valley and the Baisi kingdoms as a result of the migration of High caste Hindus from the plains of India, portions of Magrat, Chaubisi states, and portions of Kirat. The Senas of Makhwanpur acquired the title of Hindupati, or Lord of the Hindus, and claimed Rajput ancestry, as did other noble families. Since the hill region was populated by numerous indigenous mongoloid peoples, such as the Magars, Gurungs, Tamangs, Sunuwars, Rai, and Limboo of Kirat, among others. With the expansion of the Gorkha dynasty and other Hindu empires, Hinduisation of these indigenous populations began. Later, governing rulers of whatever ethnicity began to refer to themselves as Thakuris.

During the time of the Gorkha invasion, a complex Parbate or Hill caste structure emerged. The Bahun, Thakuri, and Chettri's were referred to as Tagadharis or those who wore the Janai or Sacred thread, and at the bottom were the Pani nachalne chhoi chitto halnu parne (untouchable castes) of Kami (blacksmiths), Sarki (tanners, shoemakers), Kandara (descended from Kami and Sarki), Damai (tailors (Musicians). The Parbates had neither the Vaishya nor the Sudra castes. The mountain tribes were known as Matwalis or Alcohol Drinkers. Later, Matwali tribes were positioned between Tagadharis and Pani nachalne chhoi chitto halnu parne (untouchable castes).

IV. THE MADESH OR TERAJ CASTE SYSTEM

The Terai of Nepal has a slightly different history than the hills due to its geographical and ecological differences. Due to their proximity to the culture and society of Gangetic India, the caste system was most prevalent in the Terai regions. Hindu caste groups in the Terai have a more intricate social structure than Hindu caste groups on the Hill. Terai is home to numerous indigenous peoples, including the Tharu, Rajbanshi, Koche, Meche, Dhimal, Satar, Danuwar, and Dhangars. The populations of the Terai and the neighbouring regions of northern India are nearly identical. None, except for the Rajbanshi and the Maithili, appear to have followed the caste system prior to the migration of caste Hindus from the Indian plains. The Rajbanshi adopted a Brahmanic type of Hinduism. Originally known as Koche, these people acquired a new name intended to give them equal rank with the Rajputs.

Maithali Brahmin, Bhumihar, Rajput, Kayastha, and Yaav are some of the high caste Hindus. The Baniya, Kurmi, Rauniyar, Hazam, Lohar, Badahi, Kewat, Mallaha, Teli and others constitute the middle Vaisya and Shudra ranks. Tatma, Khatwe, Chamar, Dusdh, Mushahar, Bantar, Dom, Dhobi, and Halkhor are Dalit or subaltern groups. In contrast to the Parbatiya and the Newar, the intra-regional caste hierarchy of the Terai includes neither linguistically nor culturally homogeneous tribes.

V. PRITHVINARAYAN SHAH AND THE HINDU STATE OF NEPAL

On March 21, 1770, Prithvinarayan Shah became monarch of the Nepal valley and moved his capital to Kathmandu. He adopted the royal banner of Bhatgau, introduced by Jayasthiti Malla, the red banner, "the national colour of the Hindus," as the highest flag. In his Divya Updesh, he referred to Nepal as "Asali Hindustan" (Real India) and as a "garden of four castes and thirty-six varnas." He desired national unification based on the premise "one nation, one religion, and one language."

The establishment of a large Gorkhali empire produced a conscious society comprised of rulers and subjects, subjugators and conquered. Brahmans and Chettris supplied economic and social leadership, respectively. The political domination of high caste Parbates, or the Brahman –Chettris from the west, led to the Newar being considered a Jat or caste in the emerging Nepali society. In the west, the Khasas, a non-Brahman tribe that spoke an Indo-Aryan language, were eventually Hinduized, and assimilated into the Chettri caste. The Magar and Gurung tribes also underwent a transformational process. These tribes were incorporated into Hinduism and played a significant role in Nepal's unity. In a similar manner, the egalitarian structure of the Rai and Limbu societies was transformed into castes in Kirat.

Tagadharis (those who wear the sacred thread) and Matwalis (those to whom alcohol is not taboo) are the two broad categories created by the political unification. Tagadharis are the Brahmans and Chettris, while Matwalis are the defeated people of Mongoloid origin such as the Newars, Sunuwars, Magars, Gurungs, Tamangs, Rais, and Limbus, among others.

The consolidation of the caste system was conducted under state authority. The Nepalese penal code was founded on Hindu scriptures. The upholding of the fundamental principles of Hindu law was an institution of the state, and the demotion to a low caste was one of the five most severe punishments that could be imposed. This sort of punishment was prevalent in India during the early eighteenth century, but it was a state sanctioned action in Nepal and was sometimes used to punish Gorkha adversaries. In 1762, the Palpa chiefs who had resisted Gorkha were executed, and their children were "given to the most wretched and abhorrent tribe, Sarki, to be educated in their loathsome vocation, as outcastes." A judge of the supreme court of Nepal revealed to Hodgson the following: "beneath (on the plains of India), the Shastras are but words; here, they are put into practise."

Stiller feels that the implementation of a standard Hindu law gave unity to Nepal after its political unification. This rule similarly took ethnic variety and local customs into account but did so through a process of Sanskritization. Sanskritization in its original usage indicated the ascent of castes in the social hierarchy, but he uses the term to mean the establishment of the Hindu ideal through the legal system. He finds the two usages to be "closely connected, yet distinct enough to justify drawing the reader's attention." The concept of Sanskritization, which M.N. Srinivas popularised through his study of the Coorgs of southern India, has been heavily criticised. As noted by sociologist Munshi, "a crucial difference between the early British observers of the Coorgs and Srinivas lies in the fact that Srinivas emphasises the internal process of the Coorgs to Sanskritise themselves, whereas the British observers have noted an external imposition by the Brahmins in the process of brahmanisation." An examination of Nepalese history reveals that Sanskritization was essentially the result of the imposition of the Hindu ideal law.

There have been few instances in which Sanskritization has facilitated social mobility for communities in Nepal. It was impossible for the castes that were untouchable. Even with Matwali communities elevating themselves to Brahman-Chettri rank, this has not been observed. Srinivas identifies "vegetarianism and teetotalism" as fundamental components of Sanskritization; however, these qualities are incompatible with Matwali culture. Therefore, one must consider if the Sanskritization of tribes was an internal process or the result of higher caste dominance. Srinivas asks how villagers were compelled to respect caste laws and punished for breaking them. In the case of Nepal, it was State authority exercised through the government apparatus. Even a simple analysis of Nepal's legal codes reveals the solution. Sanskritization was nothing more than the enslavement of Mongoloid populations by the main ruling castes of Nepal. Even though the laws were codified for the first time in 1854, the legal system reflects the interests of the ruling party, as evidenced by papers referring to punitive acts by royal decree even earlier.

VI. CASTE AND THE MULUKI AIN (1854)

In 1854, Jang Bahadur Rana enacted the Muluki Ain, a legal caste code that was intended to establish the social relationships between the various caste groups. According to Andras Hofer, the territorial union of the republic in 1789 was simply the beginning. The government also had to combine Nepalese society, which was comprised of three historically and regionally autonomous caste hierarchies, namely those of the Parbatiya, the Newar, and the Terai, as well as several ethnic groups, into an all-encompassing national caste system. The outcome of this integration is depicted in Figure 2. Figure 1 summarises the five groups of castes that comprise the national hierarchy. The system was a comprehensive legal code that included rules on commensality and physical contact, as well as sanctions that varied based on the caste status of the offender.

(Figure 1)

1.	"Wearers of the holy cord" (Tagadhari)	Caste category I: Pure castes (Chokho Jat) or "water-acceptable castes" (Pani Chalnya Jat)
2.	"Non-enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers" (Namasinya Matawali)	
3.	"Enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers" (Masinya Matawali)	

4.	Impure, but Touchable castes (Pani Nachalnya Choi Chito Halnunaparnya)	Caste category II: Impure castes or "water-unacceptable castes" (Pani Nachalnya Jat)
5.	Impure and Untouchable castes (Pani Nachalnya Choi Chito Halnuparnya)	

(Adapted from Hofer, A. 2012; 10)

(Figure 2)
Caste Hierarchy of the Muluki Ain (1854)

<p>1. Caste Group of the "Wearers of the Holy Cord" (<i>Tagadhari</i>)</p> <p>Upadhyaya Brahman Rajput (Thakuri) ("Warrior") Jaisi Brahman Chhetri (Ksatri) ("Warrior") Dew Bhaju (Newar Brahmins) E Indian Brahmin Ascetic Sects (Sannyasi, etc) 'Lower' Jaisi Various Newar Castes* E</p>
<p>2. Caste Group of the 'Non-enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers' (<i>namasinya matawali</i>)</p> <p>Magar* E Gurung* E Sunuwar* E Some other Newar castes* E</p>
<p>3. Caste Group of the 'Enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers' (<i>masinya matawali</i>)</p> <p>Bhote* E ("Tibetanids" and some "Tibetanoids") Chepang* E Kumal* (Potter) Hayu* E Tharu* E Gharti* (descendants of freed slaves)</p>
<p>4. Impure, but 'Touchable' castes (<i>Pani Nachalnya Chhoiee Chhito Halnunaparnya</i>)</p> <p>Kasai (Newar butchers) E Kusle (Newar musicians) E Hindu Dhobi (Newar washermen) E Kulu (Newar Tanners) E Musalman* Mleccha* (European)</p>
<p>5. Untouchable castes (<i>Pani Nachalnya Chhoiee Chhito Halnuparnya</i>)</p> <p>Kami (blacksmiths) Sarki (Tanners, shoemakers) {Kami and Sarki are of Equal Status} Kadara (Stemming from unions between Kami and Sarki) Damai (Tailors and Musician) Gaine (Minstrels) Badi (Musicians) Pode (Newar Skinners and fishermen) E Chyame (Newar Scavengers) E</p>

* = The position (Status) of the caste within the caste group is not precisely determined.

E = Ethnic Group. (Adapted from Hofer, A. 2012; 9)

The economic policies of the government also took caste status and ethnic group membership into account, so that different groups were awarded diverse land tenure and trading rights. This elevated the economic and political significance of membership in a designated ethnic group. Responses varied to this. Others merged to increase support for attempts to achieve or retain ethnic advantages.

VII. CONCLUSION

Before it became the country it is today, Nepal was comprised of numerous insignificant principalities that were constantly at odds with one another. It was the king of the relatively minor province of Gorkha, Prithivinarayan Shah, who was responsible for unifying the kingdom. He had the goal of transforming Nepal into either Asali Hindustan or the genuine Hindustan. He was successful in accomplishing this goal by adhering to the principle of having "one nation," "one religion," and "one language." The caste system developed together with the spread of Hinduism across the entirety of the country. Later on, in 1854, the Muluki Ain was implemented by Jang Bahadur Rana, Nepal's hereditary prime minister, in order to unify the country's three distinct caste systems into a single national hierarchy.

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