

Conceptualizing Territorial Mobility through Language of Those Who Move and the Dimension of Caste and Ethnicity: From Inside a Rural Nepali Community

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Abstract

Territorial mobility in traditional societies is complex. It is often flexible and ambiguous, and at times more confusing than movement in developed societies. Taking an indigenous point of view this paper examines the rural links between caste and ethnic groups and the forms and extent of territorial mobility in Nepal. The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in an eastern Nepali village during October 1988 through March 1990. An insider's typology of territorial mobility is presented, followed by an examination of caste and ethnicity with reference to Brahmin/Chhetri and *Kiranti (Yakha)* ethnic groups. The study finds that while many local forms of mobility are common to both groups, a few are specific to caste and ethnic group. However, the frequency and the extent of mobility suggests that caste groups are far more mobile than *Kiranti* ethnic groups. The fact that long established caste tradition has persisted, with continual interaction and adjustment to external socio-economic and political pressure, assures that caste and ethnicity will continue to be reflected in territorial mobility for some time to come in Nepal.

Key words: *Territorial mobility, local conceptualization, typology, basai sarai (migration), ghumphir (circulation), caste and ethnicity.*

Introduction

Territorial mobility has remained an integral part of the customary life in traditional societies such as Nepal. Changes have taken place in the context and extent of people's participation in mobility over time as households routinely respond to challenges, constraints, and obligations of rural living but it continues to be an important feature of rural living.

This paper recognizes often forgotten fact that migrations are also cultural events, rich in meanings for households and communities and as McHugh (2000:72) points out “ethnographic studies hold much potential in revealing the interplay of migration and socio-cultural change.” It argues that rural territorial mobility in Nepal when conceptualized in the language of those who move i.e., through local language, is not only complex but also the forms and meanings of territorial mobility prevalent in rural Nepal are often flexible and ambiguous, and at times more confusing than those expressed through generic concept of “migration” used in developed societies. A typology of rural territorial mobility can be built through the language of those who move. From the standpoint of western scholarship, an interpretive analysis of rural typology based on the language and experience of those who move may appear unbounded because there is no clear fit of categories with those derived from western experience nor are the time-space boundaries well defined for many forms of mobility. Mobility in Nepali society reflects its caste/ethnic and social groupings, so that some forms of mobility are specific to certain groups while many are common to all. In addition, the extent to which various forms of mobility are observed within groups is higher for caste groups primarily among Brahmin/Chhetris, probably reflective of their generally higher social and economic status vis-a-vis the *Kiranti* in the community.

The paper begins with a brief sketch of the context of conceptualizing territorial mobility through the language of those who move. It is followed by the description of field strategies and the context. The third section provides a discussion of key conceptual considerations on the themes of caste and ethnicity. Rural typology of mobility in the local language and its extent in the village is presented in the fourth section. The dimension of caste and ethnic groupings as reflected in various forms of mobility and the extent of participation forms the next section. The paper concludes with the implications of an insider’s view of mobility and the persistence of caste and ethnic dimensions in rural Nepali society.

For long, studies of territorial mobility in Nepal have revolved around the terminology of “migration” at the expense of territorial mobility in general. Using adjectives such as permanent, temporary, seasonal etc., various forms and types of mobility have been mixed up without making clear distinction between migration, circulation and commuting i.e., the common forms of population mobility. There has been no attempt to examine the transcultural nature of western terminology “migration” and whether or not this term captures all forms of mobility prevalent in rural Nepali society. More importantly, whether mobility can be conceptualized through local language, is not attempted in the literature on territorial mobility in Nepal (For exception see, Subedi, 1999).

Taking an approach of conceptualizing mobility through local language, this paper attempts to present a typology of rural Nepali mobility and examine whether and how territorial mobility in rural Nepal reflects the dimensions of caste and ethnicity. In doing so, it takes an indigenous point of view of the topic of people’s movement. Thus far, studies on territorial mobility are mainly based on the experience of western societies and consequently attempts have been made to fit the western models to the experience of traditional societies. Chapman (1985) and Bonnemaïson (1985) are exceptions where both of them have pointed out the indigenous perspective in their case studies from Pacific Islands. This paper presents a parallel view from inside a rural Asian society and argues that the people’s experience of mobility there is not necessarily the same as that of western societies. This study is also in line with recent research, which argued that consideration of subjective meanings that individuals held about their own identities, and how these meanings are constructed through particular political-economic contexts enriches the demographic research (McHugh, 2000). This paper also recognizes White and Jackson (1995):115 argument who asserted “migrants are complex and contradictory subjects whose experiences of migration are socially constructed and politically contested” (see also Lawson, 2000).

Field Strategies and the Context

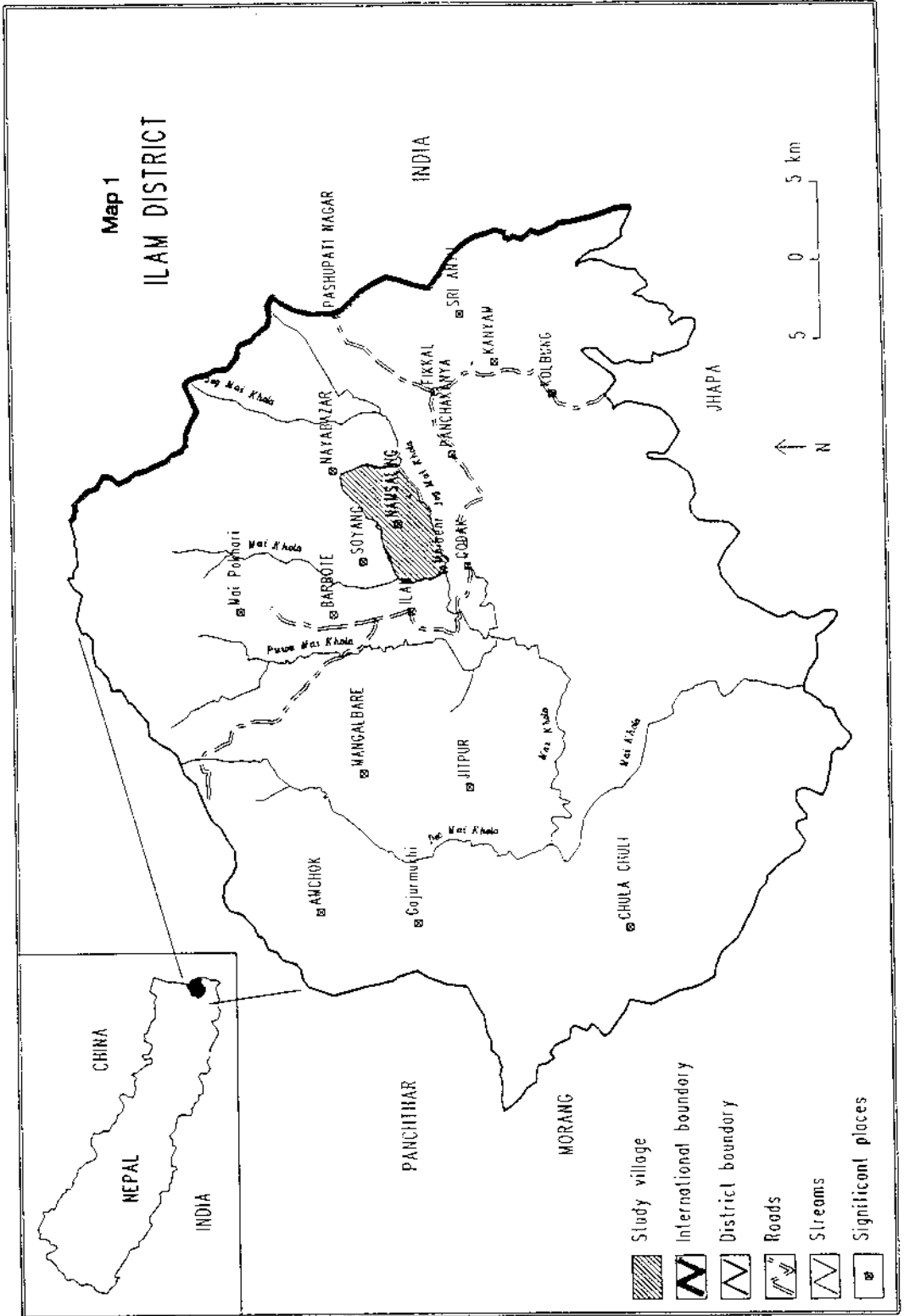
The Study Area

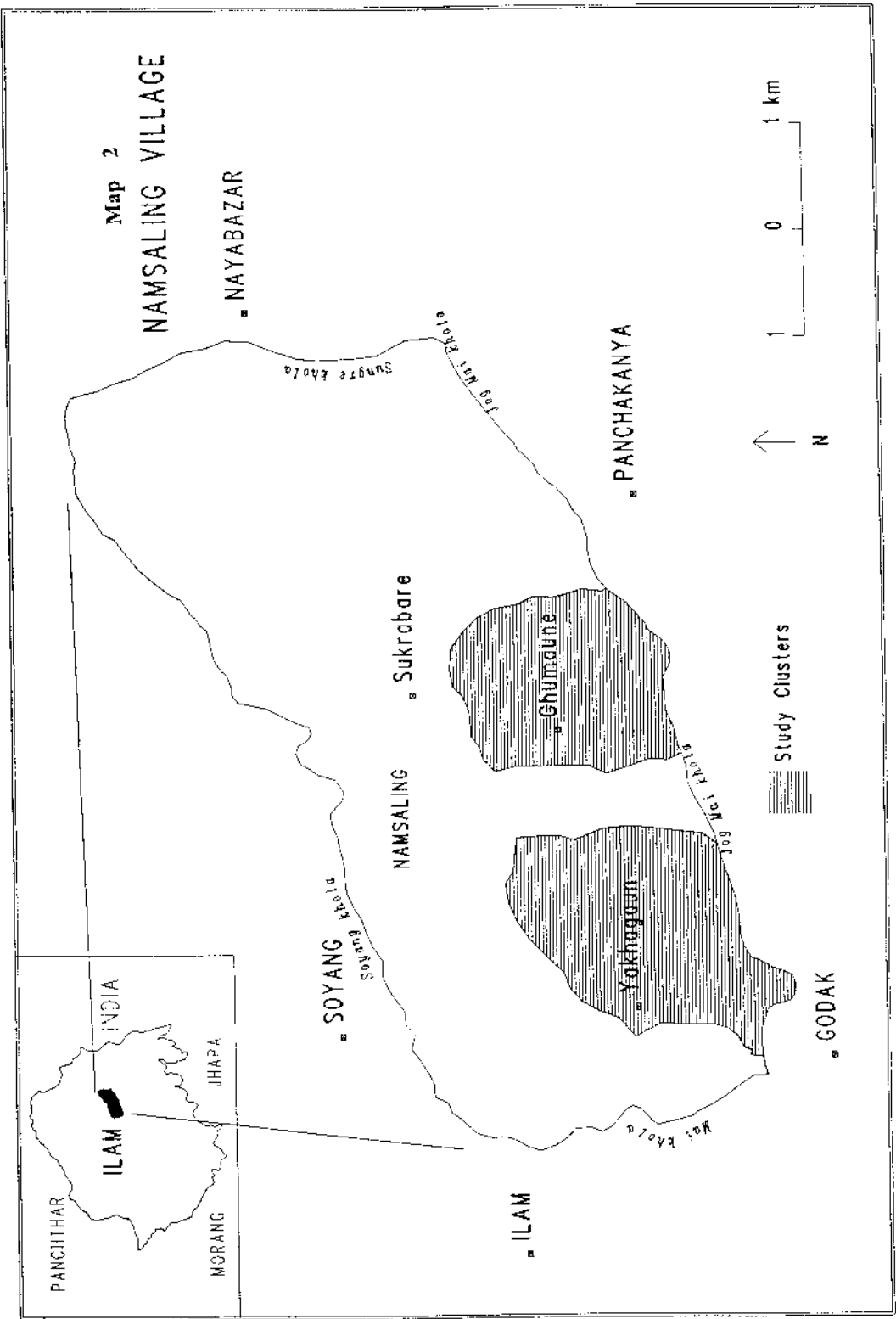
The data upon which this paper is based was collected during 18 months of fieldwork performed between October 1988 and March 1990 in Namsaling, a village located in the eastern hills of Nepal (Map 1). Namsaling occupies an area of approx. 60 square miles with elevations ranging from less than 300 masl in the river basins in the southwest to 1,800 masl in the northeast (Map 2). The nearest market center is at least three and one-half hours' walk from the village. Two settlement hamlets, Ghumaune (42 households) and *Yakhagaun* (31 households) were selected for in-depth study. The physical and environmental conditions are similar and the two hamlets are located within commuting distance of each other.

The *de jure* populations of Ghumaune and Yakhagaun are 293 and 190, respectively (Author's Census). Ghumaune is inhabited by specific caste groups (primarily Brahmin/Chhetri) and Yakhagaun by *Kiranti* ethnic groups known as the *Yakha* who were not part of caste hierarchy traditionally. Two hamlets were selected for comparative purposes. More specifically, so that the range and diversity of caste and *Kiranti* ethnic groups in each category could be related to their differential mobility experiences over the years.

Field Strategies

The field strategies designed for this research included both formal and informal instruments. The formal instruments utilized included a household census, a mobility register, an economic survey, a life history survey, and the collection of genealogies. Likewise, informal instruments utilized included participant observation, focused group discussions and the collection of folk sources such as local sayings, proverbs, expressions, and songs. In the absence of any data at the village level, a household census served as the baseline, whereas a mobility register recorded the physical absence of the economically





active (aged 15 and above) from home for six months. Any movement involving an absence of one night or more from the village was recorded between December 15, 1988 to June 15, 1989, thus providing details of the forms and extent of rural mobility. The household members were asked whether there were local terms that would conceptualize the particular move resulting from the absence of their household member from home. All these concepts/terms were recorded and later discussed in the focus groups to find out if these concepts were widely used or not. Only those that were commonly used and express meaning and significance to the household and the community were analyzed. The recording of local terms and concepts combined with historical precedence, clan genealogy, and personal testimonies were used to identify local forms and types of mobility. The economic survey combined with the household census provided comparative data on the socio-economic condition of the hamlets.

This paper offers an analysis by an insider. The roots of the commonality and differentiation by caste and ethnicity can be traced in history but the ongoing interaction of households with the world “beyond” means that several forms of mobility are continually redefined and new meanings incorporated. Furthermore, conventional bi-modal categories of mobility such as permanent-temporary, rural-urban provide simplified indices of complex reality but convey the mistaken impression of each being mutually exclusive from the other. The ebb and flow of mobility in rural Nepal is closely linked to their tradition of “territoriality” i.e., a sense of possession of a space (inherited land) with an urge to protect and transfer it to the next generation. The affective bond between place and people is far stronger in these societies compared with western industrialized world. This sense of territoriality imparts deep meaning of mobility and immobility. The cultural and social contexts that lead people of traditional societies on the move are enormously different and the circumstances of territorial mobility are vastly varied.

The analysis is based on the frequency and extent of participation by caste (Brahmin/Chhetri) and *Kiranti* ethnic groups in various forms of spatial mobility. The author’s long-standing

experience of this area and the folk sources collected were extremely useful for the overall identification and interpretation of mobility, which otherwise would have gone unnoticed. With due respect to quantitative methods and structured surveys, the thrust of field methodology was to remain close to the people and the situation being studied and to utilize all possible folk sources as they relate to the process of mobility. It was these folk sources and oral tradition that made these societies different from the contemporary western societies.

Socio-cultural Context

Namsaling was originally settled by Lapche, an ethnic group who lived in the forest and mostly concentrated on the upper ridges. This was followed by a transition when *Kiranti* groups entered this area. They were followed by Hindu caste groups around eighteenth century. During the course of acculturation, Lapche population declined, but the *Kiranti* and caste groups flourished. Small settlements of caste/ethnic groups along kinship lines evolved. *Yakhagaun*, which is exclusively occupied by *Yakhas* and Ghumaune by Brahmin/Chhetri are unique examples of this process. Over the years, Namsaling developed as the broader area of mixed Aryan/Mongoloid civilization.

Historically, the rigid caste system evolved in India probably after the arrival and growth of the Aryans around 1500 B.C. The Rig Veda (ca 1400 B.C.) contains the earliest mention of the concept of caste. Details on the basic features of caste systems are found elsewhere (see Srinivas 1962, Baker 1990). With the arrival of caste groups in this area (and throughout Nepal), an established caste system was introduced. Later, the system became modified through socialization with local ethnic groups and the adoption of Hinduism by the local groups.

Over the course of time, the Hinduised customs of the Aryan immigrants began to dominate, and local ethnic groups began to gradually adopt many of the customs and behaviors of the caste groups. As the process of Hinduisation continued, these ethnic groups became

loosely incorporated into the system. In contrast to the more rigid caste hierarchy in India, Nepali hierarchy placed these ethnic groups into the middle ranking position, i.e. the *Vaishya*, in the customary hierarchy, despite their cultural and social divergence from Aryan ideals. Their occupation as agriculturalists and their eating and drinking habits different from upper caste groups were probably the primary reasons why they were put into this middle position.

Caste and ethnic relations in this area today are the outcome of a historical process of accommodation between regional ethnic systems and the policies of a centralizing state (also see Levine, 1987). As a result, the present day boundaries between caste and local ethnic groups can be quite blurred. Although ethnic groups such as *Kiranti* (including *Yakhas*) have adopted many Hinduised customs, they have clearly retained many of their traditional customs and rituals and, significantly, have continued to use their own language. Thus, although caste and ethnicity can be considered as overlapping issues in Nepal, there remains a degree of distinctiveness that affects social interactions and group behaviors.¹

A Background of Ethnic Considerations

Ethnicity as a factor affecting demographic processes has been an issue for some time and possesses a significant literature. For example, studies have found that the fertility transition in historical Europe followed ethnic and cultural boundaries (Coale, 1973; van de Walle and Knodel, 1980). Despite wide variations in socio-economic conditions prevalent throughout southern Europe, a common cultural heritage was determined responsible for the observed fertility transition. Studies suggest further that ethnicity is not a marginal phenomenon in studies of social processes and that there are elements in modern societies, which reinforce ethnic continuity. Along these lines, Kobrin and Goldscheider (1978:1) write:

... some elements of modern society tend to reinforce ethnic continuity and emphasize ethnic differentiation. The conspicuousness of ethnic communities suggests that ethnic institutions and social networks even as they change, remain major sources of group identification. Indeed, ethnicity varies and changes over time, reflecting variations and changes in the broader society. ... study of ethnic patterns highlights and reveals in microcosm more general social processes characterizing total societies.

Caste and ethnicity were found to be important factors influencing infant and child mortality in Nepal, including eastern Nepal, where the *Kiranti* population has had consistently lower child mortality rates than the Brahmins (Choe et al., 1989). Similarly, Thapa (1989), in his analysis of nuptiality patterns in Nepal, found that ethnicity factors had significant effects on the timing of both marriage and first birth, independent of socio-economic factors.

The fact that demographic processes are interrelated and that rural societies, despite changes over time, have not given up their cultural heritage, suggests the endurance of caste and ethnicity as important elements in Nepali society. The existing literature on territorial mobility in Nepal fails to provide an understanding of caste and ethnicity as factors influencing the movements of rural Nepali, both within and outside the country (e.g. Shrestha, 1990; Gurung, 1989; Subedi, 1988; Conway and Shrestha, 1981; Shrestha, 1979; Dahal et al., 1977). Mobility analysis based on census data (place of birth and of residence) provides no information about the caste and ethnic composition of migrants. Therefore, to further our current level of understanding, caste and ethnicity must be considered in the study of territorial mobility.

Several ethnographic studies focusing on different parts of Nepal suggest some links between mobility and group association, but it remains unknown as to what extent these links are specific to certain caste or ethnic groups. Moreover, in these ethnographic studies, territorial mobility of the groups under study has been a concern peripheral to the focus of the study (Ross, 1981; Dahal et al., 1977). For example, studies on Sherpa and Tamangs documented transhumance where populations wintered at lower elevations with their animals (Furer-Heimendorf, 1975) and also travelled for wage work in nearby cities and

towns (Fricke, 1986). Similarly, a commonly observed phenomenon in western Nepal is a wider distribution of Thakali from Thak khola to the market centers of western Nepal primarily for commercial activities and catering services. This may be indicative of contemporary movement of ethnic groups, however, meanings of territorial mobility and the dimensions of caste and ethnicity associated with it have remained unexplored thus far. Understanding how rural Nepali perceives territorial mobility, therefore, is a necessary precursor to determining the role of caste and ethnicity.

Rural Typology of Mobility in Local Language and Its Extent in the Village

From the villagers' point of view, the complex forms and features of village territorial mobility can be captured in two local concepts: *basai sarai* (permanent migration or relocation) and *Ghumphir* (circulation or short-term mobility). Of the three main dimensions of classifying mobility namely time, space (distance) and motive, motive and space remain central to the types of rural mobility whereas socio-economic separation and intention to return appear to be central to distinguish between *basai sarai* and *ghumphir*, the two main forms of local mobility. Accordingly, *basai sarai* indicates a complete relocation or irreversible moves; *ghumphir* includes reversible, short-term moves incorporating absences of short duration from the village some of which are as short as absence of one night. An important distinction between *basai sarai* and *ghumphir* is whether the home community continues to perceive the mover as part of their community. For households and individuals who are part of *basai sarai*, the sending community perceives them as member of "other" community and as those who have abandoned their economic and social membership in their village.

Basai sarai captures population movements that primarily involve permanent relocation of households and individuals mostly under duress. It is because for a household that is member of agrarian community with strong ties with land and tied into the system of inheritance of land and property, and where land is considered as means of economic security, aban-

doning a place does not come easy. This means *basai sarai* as a form of mobility is a difficult decision among those who move.

Various types of mobility are captured by the concept of *basai sarai* and they carry several meanings to the involved household and the local community as a whole. Discussing details of these types and their meanings is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to mention that while some types of mobility captured by this concept carry a negative connotation, especially the *basai sarai* (type as such) and *muglan bhasine* (banishment to *Muglan*, i.e., remote places in Northeastern India, by abandoning village association due to social out-casting for being engaged in socially unacceptable behavior), others are associated with life cycle events such as *ghar khana jane* i.e., marriage migration (for details see, Subedi 1993). Local concepts explaining territorial mobility in rural Nepal suggests that motive and space remain central to the typology. The importance of temporal dimension cannot be minimized but is limited to initial identification of forms captured by the notion of *basai sarai* and *ghumphir* (circulation). Since earlier conventional studies on migration have discussed permanent migration, which mainly covers *basai sarai*, the following sections primarily discuss the various forms and extent of circulation captured by *ghumphir* in Nepal.

***Ghumphir* and Its Various Forms**

Ghumphir is the native conception of moves that do not involve long-term relocation of household and/or abandoning of the village. The duration away from home has no specific maximum limit whereas the minimum duration of absence is one night.² Those participating in the *Ghumphir* movement remain integral to the home village. Their memberships in the social and economic life there remain intact although they are physically separated from their home. Given the subjective interpretation of rural people's mobility behavior, *ghumphir* is conceptually complex, flexible, and refers to various types of movement and meanings. Involved in this concept are not only the moves with specific motives but also moves that have the appearance of being much less purposeful and not necessarily associated with a

particular 'reach'.³ The reason behind particular moves are sometimes obscure and other times clear. *Ghumphir* includes all kinds of visits made by household members for social, religious and economic motives intended to improve household status, strengthen inter-household and kin relationships, and fulfill customary household obligations. Also captured by this concept are the random moves that involve no specific reasons. Implicit in this movement is a concern to see the world beyond home and extend the link of the native place with the outside world.

The forms of mobility captured by the concept of *Ghumphir* can be classified into moves related to:

- Cultural/religious purposes,
- Socio-economic objectives,
- Obligatory/reciprocal moves,
- *Baralina jane* (walkabouts),
- *Gaunbesi garne* (transhumance), and
- *Phirne* (back home or home-coming)

It is important to note that these sub-categories are based on collective considerations, including the directions, causes, obligations, and overall interpretations of the moves by the individual members of the involved households. In this study, the extent of household's participation in these types of circulations was recorded for six months with the help of mobility register in two settlement hamlets noted earlier. Table 1 provides the extent of participation of households in different forms of *ghumphir* within the six-months period.

Moves related to cultural/religious purposes

Short-term movement primarily motivated by cultural and religious incentives include *tirthayatra* (pilgrimage), *mela herna jane* (visit to religious fair) and *astu selauna jane* (move to cremate a piece of skull of the deceased to the Ganges, Hindu's the holiest river).

These forms of movement have existed from time immemorial and are part of customary life. In this type of movement couples and individuals visit places and spots of religious importance within and outside Nepal. As described in the historical-religious texts such as *Vedas* and *Puranas*, there are *tirthas* (holy places) of greater importance and of lesser importance. A journey to these locations is meant to bring purity in self, merit (*punya*), psychological satisfaction, and enhance knowledge, which in turn elevate the social status. These forms of territorial mobility are also a way of fulfilling moral obligation to earlier generations. Praying and performing specific rituals at these religious locations are assumed to help rest the soul of deceased generation in heaven with eternal peace. In essence, it is a widespread traditional form of movement, which permits a household an opportunity to experience the world outside with religious and/or cultural motive. Of the total *ghumphir* movement (circulation) of household members within six months this type of mobility constituted 2.6 percent for caste groups and 2.0 percent for the ethnic groups (discussed later).

Moves with Socio-economic Motives

All types of territorial mobility included in this category could be considered as 'migration' in the conventional sense especially when an absence of six months or more from the village is considered as working definition. Two distinct types of such moves are commonly observed in the village: 1) educational movement and 2) economically motivated movement.

Educational movement: The native term for movement for education is *padna jane*. *Padna jane* was primarily confined to males in the past. In terms of life course, it used to begin when a child was given a holy thread in a ritual of early childhood. In a traditional sense, its motive was limited to learning religious teachings from Sanskritic texts from a *guru*. While the basic purpose was to learn customary teachings and ways of ideal living, it was also a life cycle event.

Customarily, *padna jane* was considered a part of Brahmin/Chhetri's social development, primarily the acquisition of formal knowledge about what it means to be human, the meaning of life, and one's ethical duties and rights. The transmission of moral values to new generations and the endurance of spiritual purity remains an important dimension of this type of movement. Although learning was the explicit focus, seeing the world beyond was equally important.

Economically motivated movement: The motive of *ghumphir* is not only limited to learning and transmission of moral and cultural values, but also economic causes have become an important part of village movement over time. Most of this movement is new compared with cultural and religious ones. But at times this is more evident than others. It includes: *jagir khana jane* (movement for professional service), *kulli bharti jane* (movement for wage labor), *ara katna/u jane* (labor movement specific to timber industry), and *lahure/lahur jane* (movement to join the British or Indian army).

The term *jagir khana jane* refers to movements associated with professional employment. Since white-collar jobs are not available in the village, obtaining a *jagir* (joining a job) usually means leaving the village. It brings psychological satisfaction to the household. It is also an opportunity to utilize acquired skills and to demonstrate that what was invested in education earlier was worthwhile. In fact, *padna jane* in the contemporary sense is a prerequisite to *jagir khana jane* because it is through education that the skills necessary for employment are acquired.

In practice, this form of movement is specific to men simply because men are more educated than women are and males play dominant role in the household decisions in rural communities in Nepal. While *jagir khane* (professional employment) is a way of earning a living outside of agriculture, it is also a way to earn social respect and dignity. Implicitly, this is a way to obtain outside experience and to share it with the community. Such moves are becoming more and more common given the increasing level of general education.

Kulli bharti jane which parallels wage labor movement, is meant to earn cash to pay for household commodities. It became very common during the British rule in India when construction work and resource extraction activities were abundant in the northeastern hills. This movement was restricted to men and declared after the 1950s when modern machines began to replace physical labor. However, the wage labor movement for unskilled and other low-level jobs such as coolie, watchman, etc. continues.

Ara katna/u jane is a wage labor movement specific to the timber industry and because it involves hard physical labor, it is limited to men. *Yakhas* traditionally worked in this industry to earn money. They would spend several months cutting timber and working in mills in the northeastern hills of India. While economic motives are the primary reason, experiencing the outside world is also an important aspect of this form of movement. This is reflected in the local expression: *desh pani herine; mukh pani pherine* (go out for a change of taste while see the world beyond). Today, this type of movement is limited. One former participant had this to say: 'machines have replaced men everywhere.'

The term *lahure* means 'a foreign military recruit'⁴. This type of movement commenced as a result of British recruitment policy in the early nineteenth century. The British recruited in the armed forces from a few, select ethnic groups, namely the Gurungs and Magars from the western hills and *Kirantis* from the eastern hills. Caste groups, for a variety of unclear reasons were deliberately excluded. Although the appropriateness of *lahure* has remained controversial, being recruited in the British armed forces has continued to be considered a status symbol among participants and their family as of today.

Obligatory and Reciprocal Moves

The most profound types of movements are obligatory and reciprocal ones. While all those included in this category are obligatory, not all of them are reciprocal. Thus, there are moves based on both kinship and neighborhood networks, and state obligation. Normally,

these types of moves are of short-duration and involve more males than females. Kin and neighborhood network movements involve the sense of belonging to and being attached to a place while state obligation is often a 'coerced' move. The former is age-old but the latter is a development of modern statehood. *Jhara tirna jane* (movement related to compulsory labor) and *adda/adalat jane* (movement to visit government offices) are state regulated obligatory moves. Reciprocal movements include: *janta jane* (to participate in a marriage ceremony), *maita jane* (a visit to natal home), *kanyarthu jane* (movement to look for a bride), *kadkal jane* (the escorting of a newly married young couple to the bride's parents' home), *rit puryauna jane* (movement for ritual payments) and *nimto manna jane* (movement to be a guest).

In general, this movement is crucial for the co-existence of households and to preserve congenial kinship and inter-household relationships in the rural communities. Most importantly, these are reciprocal movements. They keep family and neighbors in close contact with each other and are crucial in cementing community relations. All of these are short-term movements with absences ranging from several days to weeks. Some of them are specific to men such as *janta jane*, *kanyarthu jane*, and *kadkal jane*, while others such as *nimto manna jane* are often confined to household heads or the senior member of the household. *Maita jane* in its literal translation may appear specific to married women. But because it is specific to a place, *maita* i.e., woman's natal home, and this place is visited by the woman as well as her husband and their children, included in this form are moves made by women, their spouses and children to their *maita*.⁵

There is also movement mandated by the political and administrative regulations. Such movements occur infrequently but require the participation of all households. To fulfill state obligations household members have to occasionally participate in forced labor works. The resulting movement is locally termed *jhara tirna jane*. Another form of movement termed *adda jane* is rather indirect but is in fact part, of a state obligation whereby households may have to visit government offices to pay revenue or to transact other official business, such as

updating government records, applying for a citizenship certificate, etc. While the former is common to men in general because of the physical labor involved, the latter is restricted mainly to the head of the household. State regulations require that household heads visit several government offices for one or more reasons, once or more times during the year.

The term *Baralina Jane* refers to a form of 'walkabout' where the participants move with no specific purpose. This is a form of mobility comparable to 'liliu' in the Solomon Islands (see Chapman, 1985; Frazer, 1985). 'Liliu' means to walkabout or wander around. There are two types of *baralina jane*. The first involves young men who are unencumbered and have no household responsibilities and commitments. Some of this movement involves the defiance of family, some occur because of personal and family incidents, and some happen through sheer curiosity. At times it is merely a diversion or a pastime. The second type includes movement of people in general, primarily males, who, with or without any purpose, go out to see the world beyond and eventually return home.

The term *Gaun besi garne* is a common expression. Literally, it means moving back and forth between homesteads and agricultural and/or pasture fields, which are generally located at a considerable distance. Essentially, it is a continuation of transhumance, which is a traditional activity in Nepal's higher hill regions. Transhumance is very common in the western hills and mountains where, during the winter season, households move to lower valleys (often several days' walk) with their livestock, and then to higher areas in the summer to take advantage of seasonal pastures. Until recently, many households within the study area kept livestock in the pastures at higher hills, which were called *kharka*. This practice has virtually ceased, and what remains is a movement between *gaun* and *besi* (village settlement and wetlands in low-lying basins). It is common for some members of a household to spend as long as a month or so at the *besi* during winter.

Ghara phirne is a form of *ghumphir*, which refers to the return of absent family members to fulfill their obligations as a member of the village household and its kinship network.

Participation in annual festivals and traditional ceremonies are occasions that allow family members to reinforce their continued commitment to the village. This is comparable to what Conway (1988: 148-149) calls 'back home' among Caribbean peoples.

In addition, there are several short-term movements within the family that are so much part of daily life that they are taken for granted. This type of movement includes visits to relatives to participate in life-cycle rituals. For example *cheli/chelibeti lina/puryauna jane* (movement to receive/send off daughter or sister), *bhiksha dina jane* (movement to participate in a life-cycle ritual of a male relative), *sida puryauna jane* (to go to express condolences) and many others that often involve an absence of more than a day or two. These moves are flexible, often confusing and are delineated by family relationships. Distance is not a primary consideration in these types of movement and the duration of absence most often is defined by the closeness of the family relationship.

Caste and Ethnicity in Mobility

Differences in the experience of territorial mobility among caste and ethnic group is discussed in terms of two sub-heads namely, the forms of mobility and the extent of participation in various forms. The two settlements selected for this study namely Ghumaune and *Yakhagaun* are within a distance of about 2 kilometers and are part Namsaling Village Development Committee (VDC) which is the lowest development/administrative unit in Nepal. Caste groups dominate the demography of the VDC with Brahmin/Chhetri comprising of 46.4 percent of the total population, followed by *Kiranti* ethnic group (including Rai, Limbu, and *Yakha*) with 23.0 percent (APROSC, 1988). There is a general tendency for each group to cluster. Ghumaune and *Yakhagaun* are considered suitable locations to study the role of caste and ethnicity in mobility because while the former settlement is inhabited by caste groups primarily Brahmin/Chhetri, the latter is inhabited exclusively by a particular *Kiranti* group known as *Yakha*. In addition, they share similar physical and environmental conditions.

The Forms

Territorial mobility or movement among Nepali is deeply rooted in the past. The magnitude, frequencies of occurrence, and their relative importance, however, have not remained the same over time. A careful examination of the forms of movement described in the preceding section reveals that there are definite caste and ethnic dimensions. Three groups of movement can be identified: 1) movement specific to caste groups; 2) movement specific to *Kiranti* ethnic groups; and 3) movement common to both. This distinction is more apparent among categories of movement described by the term *ghumphir* than those described by *basai sarai*. As a result, the following discussion is largely limited to *ghumphir* forms and the extent of participation by caste and *Kiranti* ethnic groups in *ghumphir* movement.

Movements specific to caste groups are basically the outcome of Hindu customs, which the Brahmin/Chhetri (being the major group) have been following for centuries. Because *punarjanam* (rebirth) is an important aspect of Hinduism, specific activities, some of which involve movement, are seen as an investment in assuring future rebirth in a human form and in a more desirable social position.⁶ Movement has enabled these caste groups to obtain broader knowledge and experiences of the outside world, and has helped them maintain their life style. Forms of movement explicitly associated with caste groups (primarily Brahmin/Chhetri) include *tirthayatra*, *astu selauna jane*, *kanyarthu jane*, and *kadkal jane*. These movements are specific to Brahmin/Chhetri because they are directly related to the traditional practice of high caste people and are primarily illustrative of their high regard for pilgrimage, strong belief of acquiring *punya* (merit), and the importance given to the customary texts, their teachings, and honorable behavior.

The forms of movement primarily observed by *Kiranti* ethnic groups are described by the terms *rit puryauna jane*, *ara katna jane*, and *lahur jane*. Movement associated with pilgrimage is not common among *Yakhas*. *Yakhas* do, however, have specific forms of mobility, i.e., *pitri garna jane* which is similar to pilgrimage but it is very localized and

limited in extent. *Rit puryauna jane* is important among *Kiranti* ethnic groups. Many rituals are customarily preceded and/or followed by some kinds of 'payment.' For example, before marriage the groom's party is required to bring certain items such as local drinks, meat, and often times some cash to the bride's party as symbols of respect and commitment and to fix the date of the forthcoming event (marriage). Likewise, if there is an elopement and the couple decides after some time (years) to visit the bride's family, it is customary to make payment (as a symbol of respect) for taking their 'property (i.e. girl)' without their consent. Movement related to these ritual payments is usually known as *rit puryauna jane*. The word *rit* can be loosely translated as custom, indicating that this form of movement is indeed traditional and group specific. *Ara katna jane* is associated with the specific skill of cutting of timber, furniture making, and other forms of carpentry for which they have attained considerable notoriety.

Lahur jane describes the movement associated with the recruitment of *Yakhas* into the British and Indian armies. During the Anglo-Nepal war (1814-16), British commanders were highly impressed by the courage of the 'Gurkha.' The treaty of Sugauli (1816), which ended the war, permitted the British East India Company to freely recruit and enlist the 'Gurkha' into their army. From the beginning, 'Gurkha' mercenaries were recruited from a few, select ethnic groups, namely the Gurungs and Magars from the western hills and the *Kiranti* (Rai, Limbu, and *Yakha*) from the eastern hills. The British restricted 'Gurkha' recruiting to *Kiranti* only in eastern Nepal and *lahur jane* became a type of movement specific to them.

While several forms of movement are specific to either caste or *Kiranti* ethnic groups, most are common to both. For example, all forms of irreversible/reversible movement included in *basai sarai* are not influenced by caste and ethnicity, whereas many forms of movement captured under *ghumphir* are common to both. Among these, some are connected with cultural activities such as *mela herna jane*, while many are associated with immediate necessities such as *bazaar jane*. In addition, *kulli bharti jane* (labor migration)

was also a common activity in the past. Finally, except for *rit puryauna jane* all kinds of obligatory and reciprocal movements, *baralina jane*, *gaun besi garne*, and *ghar phirne*, are carried out irrespective of caste and ethnicity.

Mobility specific to caste and *Kiranti* ethnic groups has evolved over time. While many forms have been perpetuated unchanged, others have proven dynamic. An examination of changes in mobility over time also suggests that previously caste-specific patterns are becoming incorporated more and more into *Kiranti* ethnic group behavior. *Padna jane*, specific to caste groups in the past and which has become common to both groups, is one example. Over the years, its domain has not only extended to include ethnic groups, but its meaning and spatial extent has also been diversified. Its meaning is no longer limited to the social development of Brahmin/Chhetri (especially Brahmins) groups, but has been extended to include any movement for formal education and technical training.

Padna jane captured new meaning after the establishment of grade schools during the first quarter of the twentieth century. *Padnu* (to study) began to be equated with attending formal educational institutions and earning degrees. Since sending household members out for higher education meant to see the world beyond, to learn to deal with people at large, and to guide the rest of the family, it has become an important agenda of household duty. While the meaning of 'study' extended from the learning of *vedic* verses to more of a degree oriented education, it also began to bridge the gap between caste and ethnic groups. Male domination gradually gave way to include females. While formal education became a necessary precursor for white-collar jobs, taking such a job meant leaving farming and the village. Many parents quite often thought of this as a means to reducing manpower in agriculture and avoiding further fragmentation of land. Decreasing or at least stationary household resource levels further reinforced this economic dimension as the population grew. Moreover, since a university degree has become the main criterion for professional employment, it has also reinforced *jagir khana jane*, which as a result, has become diversified and common to all irrespective of caste, gender, and distance.

The Extent

An understanding of the typology of rural mobility in traditional societies is incomplete without an analysis of the extent to which households participate in each category of movement. For this, a comparison of caste and ethnic groups is essential given that Nepali society is characterized by the coexistence of several caste and ethnic groups. Caste and ethnic groups in this area have occupied environmentally similar areas and have pursued similar occupations. While there are group specific moves, the reflection of caste and ethnicity is more prominent in the extent (frequency) of participation in different categories of movement (Table 1). Likewise, caste and ethnic difference is primarily reflected in the reversible forms of mobility. Therefore, caste and ethnic comparison is essentially limited to the types of mobility conceived under *ghumphir*.

Table 1
The Extent of *ghumphir* among Caste and Ethnic Groups
(Between Dec. 15, 1988 - Jun. 15, 1989)

Types of <i>ghumphir</i> (circulation)	Brahmin/Chhetri			<i>Kiranti (Yakha)</i>		
	Moves			Moves		
	No.	Percent	Per hh*	No.	Percent	Per hh
<i>Tirthayatra</i> (including other forms of cultural moves)	11	2.6	0.3	3	2.0	0.1
Wage labour and other professional employment	37	8.7	0.9	7	4.8	0.2
Obligatory/reciprocal (kinship/neighbourhood network)	167	39.3	4.0	44	29.9	1.4
Obligatory (state and administrative obligations)	42	9.9	1.0	62	42.2	2.0
<i>Baralina jane</i> (Walk about)	21	4.9	0.5	6	4.1	0.2
<i>Ghara phirne</i> (back home)	126	29.7	3.0	16	10.9	0.5
Unspecified moves	21	4.9	0.5	9	6.1	0.3
Total Moves	425	100.0	10.7	147	100.0	4.9

Note: This table is based on the physical absence recording of *de jure* members of the households (aged 15 and above) and excludes the inward movement of visitors.

* hh stands for household

Source: Mobility Register, 1988/89.

The overall understanding of mobility between Brahmin/Chhetri and *Yakha* reflect that the patterns of moves are consistent for both groups. The percentage distribution of participation frequency also reflects this. It is also consistent because for both groups moves categorized as obligatory and reciprocal constituted the frequently observed ones. This is followed by recurrent moves of *ghar phirne*, which includes some forms of transhumance and frequent visits back home (back and forth) of *de jure* members of households who are away from home for more than six months. The cultural/religious category proved to be the least frequent form of movement.

While the types of movements are similar, the extent of participation is distinctive. Caste groups rank higher than ethnic groups in terms of moves per household. In fact, the overall average number of moves per household for caste groups is more than double of that for *Kiranti* ethnic groups i.e. 10.7 against 4.9. This applies to all forms of movement except those resulting from state and administrative obligations. The explanation of higher frequency of state and administrative obligatory move among *Kiranti* group, however, lies solely in the timing of the field study. The *Yakha* who lived in the political unit or ward in which the field study was conducted were required to go twice for compulsory state regulated labor work within the study period. Normally, the overall obligatory work requirement is divided equally among all wards.

Some Interpretations of Ethnic Dimension in Mobility

The differences in the frequency of movement data need to be interpreted within their historical contexts, and with consideration given to the current social and economic indicators, which differentiate caste and ethnic households. If history is any indication, Brahmin/Chhetri groups are likely to shift their location more often than members of ethnic groups.

According to their oral tradition, Brahmins originated from Kannauj (northern India) during seventh century. Their self-identification as Kanyakubja (Kannauj) Brahmin reflects this

association. Historical records show that these groups came from the north and northwest regions of India during the eleventh and twelfth centuries and gradually migrated to the east in and around the present study area. Details discussed by Subedi (1993) collectively illustrate several processes and contexts through time over space, which resulted into diffusion of caste groups along the hills of Nepal and an analysis of concurrent historical events.

The *Kiranti* ethnic group, on the other hand, is considered by some historians, to be aboriginal origin of the hills of Nepal. They were highly concentrated in the eastern hills, and are said to have migrated to Namsaling from Chainpur (Sankhuwasabha, Nepal) more than six generations ago. Despite some evidence of their recent dispersal to the Tarai, it is still safe to say that, compared with the caste groups, their dispersal has been limited. The tendency of *Kiranti* dwellings to cluster around the village core makes it socially more difficult for individual households to isolate themselves from the hamlet. This is in contrast to Brahmin/Chhetri settlements, which tend to be less nucleated with individual households dispersed and closer to their own land holdings.

The number of generations spent in a particular area is one indication of high/low mobility. Evidence related to this suggests higher level of mobility to caste groups compared with *Kiranti* groups. Among Brahmin/Chhetri while three-fourths of the total households within the study area had been living there for generations, only one-fourth had arrived within the last one or two generation. On the other hand, all the *Yakha* households had been living there for at least five generations. This also suggests that *Yakhas* are more tied to the place than Brahmin/Chhetris.

The higher mobility among Brahmin/Chhetri groups is also closely associated with current social and economic indicators (Table 2). The size of the average Brahmin/Chhetri household is larger than that of the *Yakha*. Similarly, the sex ratio is higher for the Brahmin/Chhetri group than for the *Yakha* group. It is clear that in both groups males are more mobile than females.⁷ In addition, observation suggests that the larger the size of the household, the

higher the frequency of mobility (especially circulation). Except for age at marriage, all numerical figures show *Yakhas* to rank lower. Age at marriage, however, does not seem to have much impact on the extent of territorial mobility.

The percentage of population born outside the village can be taken as the areal extent of the social (marriage) field. If a wider marriage field is an indication of greater mobility, the fact that only 23 percent of the *Yakha* females were born outside the village, as opposed to 40 percent among Brahmin/Chhetri females would indicate greater mobility among the Brahmin/Chhetri group. In fact, while seven percent of Brahmin/Chhetri women were born outside of the district, no woman among the *Yakhas* was native to another district.

The most important difference between the groups appears in the social indicators pertaining to education. Literacy among the Brahmin/Chhetri far exceeds that of *Yakhas* (Table 2). This is most obvious in the case of high school completion. One-fourth of the caste groups' population has completed school education, whereas only six percent of *Yakhas* have been able to do so. Closely related to education is the percentage of households that are at least partially supported by government employment and teaching. The gap between the two groups in this comparison provides a clear indication that caste groups are more involved in government service (employment) and teaching than are *Kiranti* ethnic groups. Such involvement in general means a separation of work place from home, which in turn indicates higher mobility.

Table 2
Social and Economic Indicators among Caste and Ethnic Groups

Indicators	Brahmin/Chhetri	Kiranti (Yakha)
Household size	07.0	06.1
Percentage of male population	51.9	50.0
Percentage of economically active population*	56.7	53.7
Percentage literate	82.4	57.3
Percentage with Secondary school education**	24.3	05.9
Land per capita (in <i>ropani</i> #)	07.9	06.9
Land per household (in <i>ropani</i>)	54.4	42.0
Percentage of household who support from professional service and teaching	38.1	25.8
Mean age at marriage	17.5	21.2
Percentage born outside the hamlet	28.3	14.8

Notes: * Includes individuals aged 15 to 59.

** Those who have completed at least 10 years of schooling.

Ropani is a commonly used unit of land measurement in Nepal. One *ropani* equals 0.051 hectare.

Source: Household Census, 1989 and Economic Survey, 1989.

It is important to note that Brahmin/Chhetri groups have traditionally been aware of the value of education. When formal education was initiated in Nepal, the caste groups were the ones who immediately responded by sending their children to schools. As a result, they were able to capitalize on the opportunities requiring formal schooling. Many young adults of caste groups left the village for further study and after completing their studies some were able to secure service/teaching positions in new areas or in the village itself. This ultimately resulted in the difference between caste and ethnic groups in terms of the percentage of households supported from off-farm work. It also perpetuated the economic and social advantage enjoyed by the Brahmin/Chhetris.

Yakhas have been slow to respond to changes in Nepali society and, in almost all areas, have lagged far behind the caste groups, in the realization of benefits. As the adage goes *aghi aaune bhariya ko roji bisauni* (the first to arrive gets the best place to rest), the caste

groups proved their ability to adjust earlier to the changing national scene. Though ethnic groups are adapting more rapidly today, the pace is still rather slow, a situation not different from what is reported elsewhere in South Asia. Baker (1990: 58), for example, points out in an Indian context "...but at grassroots level social change is acutely slow."

As individuals stay away and interact with 'home', a chain effect develops. Those staying away for some years extend their kin and/or neighborhood network as some of them marry at reach. This, in turn, forces them into frequent interactions to maintain close linkages within the home network, which means an increase in movement.

Economically, the livelihood of caste and ethnic groups is based on the year round cultivation of their occupied land. The quality of arable land used by each settlement is similar as are the prevalent ecological conditions. However, most *Yakhas* are poor compared with the Brahmin/Chhetri. Land possession is, perhaps, the single most important economic indicator. The amount of land per household is lower for *Yakhas* than for Brahmin/Chhetri. One might argue that having less land to cultivate would lessen the agriculture based ties to home, resulting in more mobility. However, that does not seem to be the case. The counter argument is that for *Yakhas* to produce more from less land they must intensify their work effort, thereby leaving less time for movement. This intensified effort by the *Yakhas* has not proven satisfactory in itself, when compared with the Brahmin/Chhetri farmers who produce a greater variety of crops, and use more intensive multiple cropping and inter-cropping systems than do the *Yakhas*. Thus the relation of high or low amount of land possession with the frequency of movement is unclear among these two groups.

The *Yakhas* are less mobile. It is probable that they cannot afford to go away because the crops that they produce are at best barely sufficient for their daily consumption and yield no surplus for cash sale. They do not feel a sense of economic security to the point that they can leave their families to search for work (an act which invariably carries the risk of failure). Furthermore, *ara katna jane* which was the avenue for many *Yakhas* to travel has

been severely limited in recent years and has not been superseded by other options. Moreover, *Yakhas* are more fun loving and have spent more time and resources on festivals and elaborative rituals. One *Yakha*, during a focussed group discussion in 1989, commented:

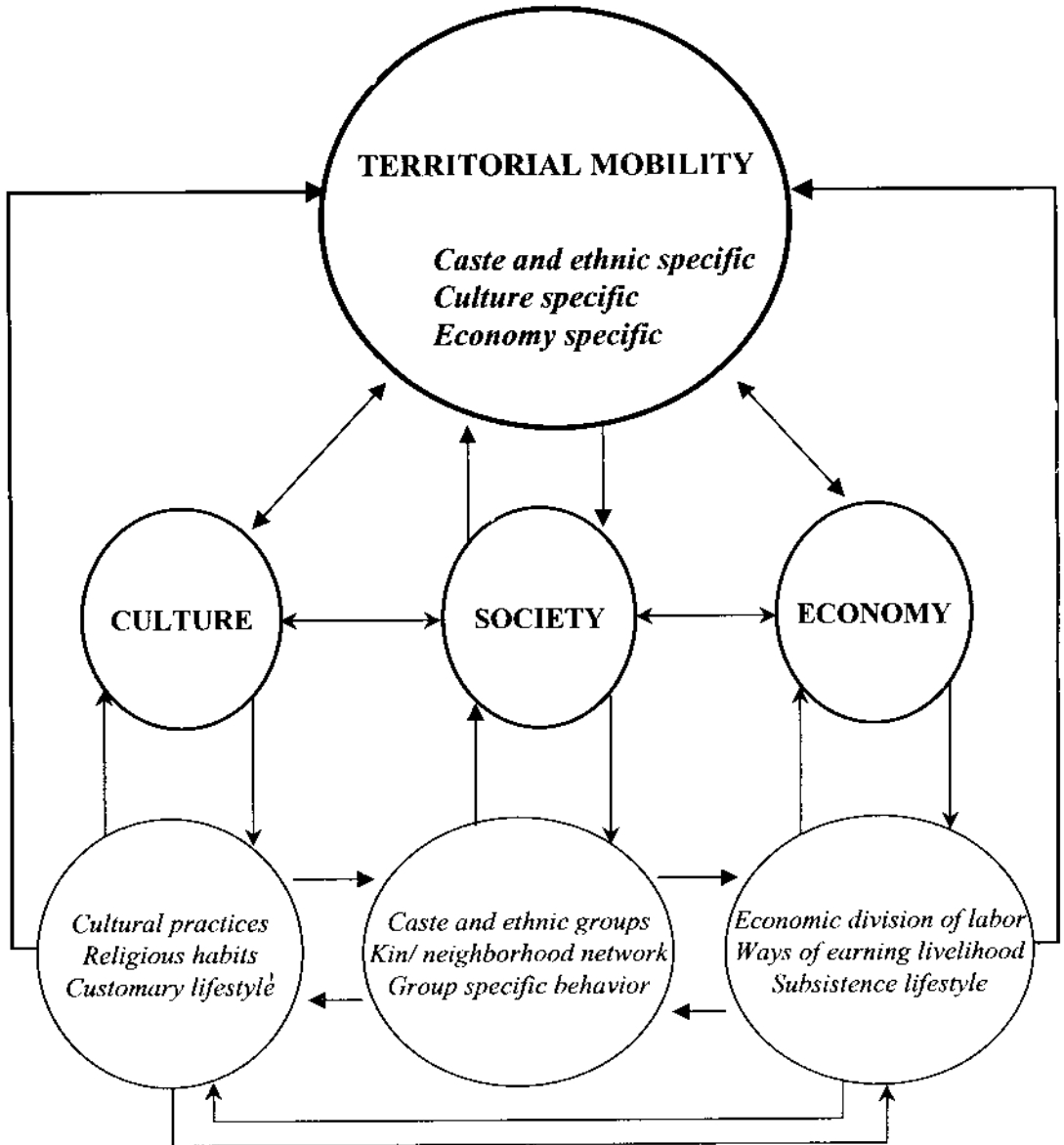
Our way of celebrating life-cycle rituals and festivals are, unlike Brahmin/Chhetri groups, more expensive and elaborate. No celebrations are complete without items such as *jand*, *raxi* (local alcoholic beverage comparable to beer and whisky) and pork meat, preparation of which takes several days. Again, a visit to relatives during festivals is costly on both sides because of specific requirements.

All this suggests that *Kiranti* ethnic groups (*Yakhas*) are less mobile as compared to the Brahmin/Chhetris. This indication of greater mobility among caste groups is not limited to the present and evidences of such conventional mobility exist in the historical records. Moreover, this is not an isolated case. Similar references are made elsewhere, especially in the context of caste distributions in northern India. For example, Sopher (1986:8) notes “caste distributions are themselves, in part, the consequence of long standing patterns of circulation . . .”

Conceptualizing the Caste and Ethnic Differences

Caste and ethnicity are societal realities within the area and territorial mobility reflects this fact. The mechanisms of caste and ethnicity work independently as well as in combination with other aspects of society (Figure 1). Caste and ethnicity as integral parts of society induce specific forms of mobility. By virtue of belonging to a certain caste or ethnic group, a household is more likely to participate in certain forms of mobility rather than others. Many kin and neighborhood networks and group obligations and behaviors could not be maintained without groups temporarily leaving their place of residence. There are also moves specific to economic livelihood and lifestyle without which neither the procurement of daily necessities nor the long-term household economy is secured. It is also true that cultural practices, religion, and traditional life style based on long standing societal values force the household to participate more in culture specific forms of mobility.

Figure 1
Caste and Ethnicity in Territorial Mobility



On the other hand, the three central components i. e., culture, society, and economy (Figure 1) are clearly interdependent. The interaction among them is complex: one factor influences or reinforces another and, in turn, is reinforced by other factors, singly or jointly. In the mobility context, caste and ethnicity affect the cultural and economic sphere of society, giving rise to territorial mobility, which on the other hand, is also an outcome of a mutual interaction process. Territorial mobility, in turn reinforces the economy, enhances the socio-cultural lifestyles, and helps to continue and improve societal networks. In doing so, mobility exerts continuing pressure on traditional life styles. The overall process is interactive, resulting in different forms and frequencies of movement, both within the settlements and individual households.

Conclusion

To further our understanding of territorial mobility in traditional societies it must be perceived differently than through the use of conventional categories. The mobility typologies and experiences described in this paper offer one way to do this and imply several things. Mobility in traditional societies may reflect parallels with standard classifications of migration and circulation. But the concepts notably *basai sarai* and *ghumphir* are not necessarily analogous. More importantly, the indigenous categorizations reflect that mobility is based on collective considerations of time, space, place attachments, meanings, and individual life cycles. As a result, the spatio-temporal dimensions are more complex than is usually recognized.

While traditional societies have forms of mobility that have the appearance of premeditation, there are many forms that are undertaken with little or no planning. Thus, attempts to unravel specific motives can be difficult and misleading because moves are not always purposeful and objective. This observation is consistent with studies elsewhere, especially on island societies in To'ambaita (Frazer, 1985) and Australia (Young and Doohan, 1989). Furthermore, mobility not only reflects economic tangibility but also long-standing social

and cultural realities in the society. Thus, while many forms of mobility are observed irrespective of caste and ethnic affiliations, there are some that are specific to each of the groups. More importantly, the extent of participation clearly shows the societal significance of caste and ethnicity. Caste groups clearly are more mobile than the ethnic groups in the study area. The high level of mobility among caste groups relate not only to economy but also to history, culture and level of educational achievement. As commonly accepted, mobility is dominant among specific age groups although, for some forms of mobility, gender and seniority is more important than age.

Social regulations related to caste have faced severe pressure over the years and virtually all-strict regulations (related to caste) are now in jeopardy. Today three major processes are in constant operation: 1) progressive Hinduisation of local ethnic groups; 2) the expansion of socio-economic, political, and external influences to all households and to all groups; and 3) the increasing prominence of economically motivated movement rather than socio-cultural movement (Fig.1). This may appear to indicate that traditional mobility has been discontinued and that the influence of caste and ethnicity has diminished. However, the breakdown of certain features does not mean that caste identities have been lost. Changes in society, especially in inter-caste relations, over time, tend to be organizational rather than structural (Ainapur, 1986) without damaging the main frame of reference, which continues to be caste (Choudhary, 1987; also Channa, 1979)). Thus, the long-standing dominance of traditions including caste and ethnicity continue to have profound influence in the pattern of mobility. The studies on caste issues with similar circumstances have substantiated this. For example, Choudhary's study in northern India (1987) found that although caste and ethnicity appeared to be weakening on the surface, the core was still throbbing and, time and again, was stimulated by political, economic, and social forces. The dominance of upper castes in political and economic life is a clear indication of this phenomenon.

Caste and ethnic differences in migration may have been narrowing elsewhere as evident in some studies (see, Sandefur and Jeon, 1991). However, in these societies caste and ethnicity

are not marginal issues and to argue that caste is giving way to class (Sharma and Dak, 1985) would be a premature assessment. Moreover, territorial mobility based on customary life style has remained integral to caste and ethnic groups as a means of coping with changing circumstances, especially with the changing meanings of 'home' and 'reach.'

Finally, building a mobility typology and improving our understanding of territorial mobility of the Asian society through the language of those who move and the caste and ethnic dimensions are not in themselves sufficient to ensure their continuity and advancement in the future. However, their recognition will greatly enhance the formulation, distribution, and implementation of social provision of services and population redistribution policies meant for the development of rural communities in general.

Notes

¹ Ethnicity is multi-dimensional of which caste is one dimension. However, for the lack of appropriate terminology to distinguish *Yakhas* from caste groups, the words ethnic groups has been used. The terms non-caste may have been used but given their incorporation into a third group of caste hierarchy at times, it did not seem appropriate. The terms race and tribal group are even more controversial to use when designating the *Yakha* group.

² This timeframe of minimum absence of one night is based on discussion with study population about realization of absence of their family member from the household. This working definition is also consistent with studies of mobility in Thailand (Singhenetra-Renard, 1982), Indonesia (Hugo 1875; Mantra 1978) and Pacific Island (Chapman 1987).

³ Because the places visited are short-term 'stations' especially under the *Ghumphir* movement, the term 'reach' is preferred to the commonly used term destination. This use is also consistent with the commonly held belief of local people most of whom believe in rebirth of individuals that human being could be born in one of 8.4 million form. To them, salvation from earthly births and rebirths is the destination of individual.

⁴ Occasionally and at some parts of the middle hills of Nepal, the term *lahure jane* is also used to refer to the movement of young women to the towns of India where they usually end up working as prostitutes. However, this movement is normally limited to low caste and local ethnic groups and the use of this term in this sense is extremely localized.

⁵ There are moves referred to as *sasurala jane* and *mawala or mamaghar jane*. The former refers to a move of a husband to his wife's natal home and the latter refers to the movement of children to their mother's natal home. Since these are directly related to *maila jane* in destination, purpose, and meanings, they are considered part of *maila jane* in a broader sense.

⁶ *Kiranti* groups may also adhere to a belief in rebirth (which this study did not explore further), but their important sacred locations are local and clan-specific whereas the Hindu areas are spread over most of South Asia.

⁷ Males being more mobile than the female population is a common feature of South Asia, unlike some of the countries of Latin America and Southeast Asia.

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