

CASTE SYSTEM IN MEDIEVAL NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the functioning and dynamics of the caste system that prevailed in medieval Nepal from 879 to 1768 AD. Nepal is a country which has a rich diversity of castes, languages, religions, and cultures. On the one hand, it has long been a matter of pride for Nepal to host such a diverse society and on the other hand, this very diversity has espoused various critical interpretations, particularly when it comes to ethnicity and power relations. While the ancient traditions and culture of the country continue to shape the foundation of the present Nepali society, the influence of the medieval social and caste system is still present today. Irrespective of the socioeconomic implications of the caste system in the Nepali society, what the society practiced in medieval times in terms of different castes has a strong influence on the way Nepali society functions today. Although it cannot be said that the caste system is necessary and useful in all societies, there is evidence that the system was introduced by the kings and subjects of that time to make the medieval Nepali society systematic and dignified in their own ways. Of course, society is always fluid and should continue to change. However, the fact that the medieval caste system continues to survive in today's Nepal. It is a strong proof that great change has not taken place yet in our society. The medieval caste system is becoming the basis of human identity even today. The co-existence of a diverse group of people in Nepali society has in both way nurtured the caste system by promoting the idea that diversity is good for society and its functioning. While there has been an effect of melting pot concept owing to urbanization and population growth in recent years, the fabric of Nepali society in the medieval period demonstrates a distinct caste system brought to operation from a utilitarian motive. This article aims to analyse this very distinct feature of Nepal's medieval society wrought in the caste system in its crude form. The article not just explores the functioning of the caste system in medieval Nepali society but also exposes how it remains intact even today. This article uses descriptive and analytical methods. In course of writing, the arguments have been made based on secondary resources.

Keywords: varna - occupation - society - religion - culture - system

BACKGROUND

The history of Nepal has been studied in three parts: ancient, medieval, and modern. The main basis of the division of time is considered to be the end of one and the historical event ruled by another dynasty (Vaidya 1996). With the end of the Lichchhavi regime, the end of ancient antiquity in Nepal (Gautam 2019), and the beginning of the Medieval Age since the Malla dynasty took over the governance of the country (Shah 1992). This period lasted from 879 to 1768 AD. King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha captured the Kathmandu Valley and ended the Malla rule. In the Medieval Age, Nepali society was developed based on different castes. The then kings and emperors also supported the caste system (Sharma 2001). In the society of medieval Nepal, the profession according to caste was organized. Among the medieval kings, Jayasthiti Malla is found at the forefront of re-organizing the caste system of Nepal.

When studying the history of human development, primitive society was not as fully developed as it is now. People lived in the forest. They didn't even know how to communicate with each other. There was no clarity on the face either. The fingers were rough and the whole body was covered with hair. It took thousands of years for these ancient humans to take on the physical form of modern humans. They had to go through the era of different types of stone tools (Pande & Regmi 2005). History has studied human activity since its inception. The historical period before the development of the art of writing is called the prehistoric period (Acharya 2011). From time immemorial to 6,000 years ago, human society had not developed any practice of discrimination on the basis of caste or religion (Prasrit 1999). They would have lived in the same status and existence. But around 2500 BC, along with the development of writing, people had developed a state of caste and class stratification. As a result, the caste system was developed in human society (Davis 1968). Nepal is the cradle of one of the ancient civilizations of the world, which is shown by the discovery of ancient artifacts (Gauram 2019). This system entered Nepal from India and constantly grew in Nepali society. Later it became an identity of Nepali people coming to the medieval period (Sharma 1978). The caste system is not a new phenomenon in Nepali society. There is a clear gap of knowledge and research-based when it comes to clarifying the caste system of the medieval period and owing to the co-operation among different groups which make Nepal the multicultural garden of its citizen is

its objective. The caste system has strong roots in Nepali society today, so the importance of this article is justifiable.

METHODOLOGY

The article is mostly based on secondary sources. The resources used are collected from various libraries and personal collections. Based on such collected sources, this article has been prepared on the basis of descriptive and analytical methods. The deductive theory and qualitative research designs with their historical chronological order are used in the process of collecting and analysing the data and drafting it.

CASTE SYSTEM: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

The word caste means the same as the Latin word 'castus' (Dutta 1968). The term 'caste' was first used around the 15th century AD. The word 'caste' was first used in the English language in 1455 AD. In India, the word 'caste' was used to identify a certain class, community, or group of people who were socially different from others in order to maintain blood purity in society (Ghure 1961). Caste is a close ally, economic empowerment group, hereditary equality, independence, and traditional organization, which is bound by a special rule and leadership. It is a category, a line, a homogeneity caste marriage, and a social classification that is hereditary and long-lasting (Bereman 1972). Caste is an extension of an ancient family. At that time, they were involved in the same profession. They had intermarriage. Gradually, they were able to establish a separate identity by joining the same caste on the basis of birth. Caste is the smallest social unit and primarily a community. Such a community is not just racial and ethnic. Although initially a limited and small unit, in time it has become a historically established community. It is not only a momentary gathering but also a group of human beings who have developed into a stable community with a more common language, culture, traditions, caste, and ethnicity. In the course of human development, along with environmental differences, racial and ethnic differences were increasing and many human species were developed in the world (Darwin 2012). With the development of civilization and the establishment of state power, nations such as the Czechs, Romans, Tautens, Itasca, Greeks, Gaul, Britons, etc. was developing in the world. Although there should be a common language and tendency for each caste it is no evidence that there should be a different language for different castes (Stalin 2010).

One family group developed in the early days was gradually divided into subgroups. Certain social rules were being formed for such groups and subgroups. On the basis of that, the same ancient race has been expanding till the present time and various other races have developed in the world (Nehru 1988). Of these, about 3,000 are now living in India and 125 castes in Nepal. The development of such castes is believed to have started in India around 1500 BC and in Nepal with the same expansion. Vaidehajan, who entered the Terai region of Nepal around 1400 BC, introduced the primitive varnashrama system-based caste system to Nepal (Prashrit 2006). It is believed that the caste system has been expanding in Nepal since that time.

Nepal is basically a country inhabited by species of origin such as Aryans, Mongols, Astriks, and Dravidians (K.C 2009). In the pre-Christian period, the states like Mithila, Kapilvastu, and Ramgram in the Terai region of present-day Nepal were ruled by the rulers of regional dynasties. There were also expanding people of untouchable castes like Chandal and Nishad who accepted the Hindu caste system. The caste system also had an impact on the Shakya dynasty. Even in the Kathmandu Valley, ethnicity had an effect in the ancient period. Based on the words like Vrijjikkarthaya, Koligram, Sthrudrang, Gautamashram, Bharatashram mentioned in some records and other sources found in Kathmandu Valley, it is clear that people of different castes used to live in Nepal at that time.

The caste system that was expanding from India in the Terai region of Nepal almost 3000 years ago and the caste system that was expanding as a result of that was taking deep roots in the society of the time. Its impact was gradually being felt in the hilly areas of Nepal and especially in the Kathmandu Valley (Prashrit 2001). Based on such sources, the caste system has been expanding in different parts of Nepal since the ancient period.

CASTE STRUCTURE IN MEDIEVAL NEPAL

The middle Age is believed to have started in Nepal from the ninth century AD. The Thakuri dynasty and then the Malla dynasty ruled in the early Ages (Shah 1992). Among those Malla rulers, Jayasthiti Malla worked to reorganize the caste system in the then society in the Kathmandu Valley (Budathoki 1982). During his regime, he reorganized the caste system with the help of Brahmins Kritinath Upadhyaya (Kanyakubja), Raghunath Jha, and Ramnath Jha (Maithil), Srinath Bhatt, and Mahinath Bhatt (Dakshintya) (Sharma 1978). From that time onwards, the caste

system in the hilly areas of Nepal and the Kathmandu Valley became rigid and the practice of untouchability was becoming institutionalized.

King Jayasthiti Malla of medieval Nepal worked to strengthen the existing weak ethnic structure in Nepal reclassifying them on the basis of Hindu religious epics in the caste system. He re-classified the then Nepali society and divided it into four Varnas and sixty-four castes on the basis of Manusmriti. He determined the traditional occupation according to caste while determining the social rules. In that too, he had made an arrangement to punish him as a criminal if he was given a certain profession by another caste (Budhathoki 1982). Due to this, the caste system flourished in Nepal from that time onwards and caste discrimination and untouchability were developing in the society of Kathmandu Valley (Kshetri & Rayamajhi 2003). Towards the end of the Medieval Age, a definite boundary was established between the castes in Nepali society and the feeling of superiority on the basis of caste was fully developed (Kisan 2009). In this sense, medieval Nepali society seems to be based on the caste system.

In the middle Ages, occupation-based caste and caste-based social rules were determined. Jayasthiti Malla had instructed to adopt the prescribed behavior regarding the dress, ornaments, and huts according to the caste in order to make the then Nepali society systematic in a timely manner. The rules laid down in this way were different for each caste and it was up to the state machinery to see if those different rules were followed (Panta 2008). In the dress code prescribed during the reign of Jayasthiti Malla, he had instructed the butchers to wear sleeveless clothes and not to wear hats, shoes, and gold ornaments (Budhathoki 1982). When Jayasthiti Malla followed the social practices mentioned in the memoirs of Manu, Yagyavalkya, etc., and applied them to the medieval Nepali society, the transportation, settlement, etc. of the then Nepali society had changed a lot (Kisan 2009). Although it is said that Nepali society had become systematic and disciplined for a long time due to the establishment of such a system, it has had a negative impact in the long run (Dahal 2006). Due to the caste system, Nepali society is still affected by social discrimination and untouchability.

The Gopal, Mahispal, Kirant, Licchavi, and other castes who have been living in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal since ancient times were included in the Newar community on the basis of speaking the Newari language or Nepali language in the Middle Ages (Kisan 2009).

The Brahmin Aryans of Indian origin who entered and the Shakyas who entered the valley after the fall of Kapilvastu's kingdom were all included in the Newar community. The caste system had been established in Nepali society since the Licchavi rule. Buddhism has been flourishing in Nepal since the reign of Licchavi king Vrishdev. King Vrishadeva himself was a Buddhist. After the marriage of King Anshuvarma's daughter Bhrikuti to King Shrongchongampo of Tibet, Buddhism was spreading in Tibet as well. In the ancient Kathmandu Valley, especially in the Lalitpur area, most of the people were Buddhists and a number of monasteries were built in the area. Although the sense of ethnicity was very low in the Buddhist community, it could not challenge the ethnic structure of the Kathmandu Valley as Buddhism was spreading in the Kathmandu Valley. Apart from this, Buddhism had also moved forward under the direction of the so-called upper caste Hindus (Budhathoki 1982). Due to this, it was the Buddhists who did not believe in ethnic hierarchy and apartheid who fell into the trap of ethnicity, which is the modern form of ethnicity.

During the regime of Jayasthiti Malla, inverse marriages with castes below then one caste were considered normal, but inverse marriages were forbidden in society. At that time, there was a belief in society that doing a good deed by a small caste destroys both the clan and the age (Budhathoki 1982). During the time, a rule was also made to reduce the caste of people who work outside the prescribed rules.

In the period of King Jayasthiti Malla in medieval Nepal, it was the rule to keep a woman of any caste, regardless of her caste in the Poda community (Kisan 2009). He also re-divided the people of Brahmin, Chhetri, Vaishya, and Shudra Varnas into several castes and divided them into a total of 725 castes and sub-castes including 64 castes and other sub-castes of the Newar community. In ancient India, castes were divided on the basis of occupation, just as Jayasthiti Malla also had determined caste on the basis of occupation (Kshetri & Rayamajhi 2003). In determining such a profession, people of certain castes were forced to do so-called lower-level jobs. Gradually, caste discrimination was taking root in Nepali society. Even the so-called small and untouchable castes were given a place to live outside the city. At that time, a rule was made that Shudra's son was not allowed to witness any work (Panta 2008). Even in the same crime, the small caste was punished harshly and the upper caste people were given general punishment (Kisan 2009). As this trend continued till the Rana

period, it seems that Jang Bahadur Rana gave legal recognition to such caste discrimination in the Civil Act of 1910 BS.

In the Medieval Age, King Ram Shah of Gorkha also recognized the caste-based system prevalent in the Kathmandu Valley established by Jayasthiti Malla in the Gorkha state. Based on this, it can be considered that the caste tradition determined in the Kathmandu Valley is gradually expanding throughout the Kingdom of Nepal. From the time of Ram Shah's rule, those who went outside their caste and ate and drank solidly were punished according to their caste. A clear example of caste discrimination is the provision of deportation for killing Chautaria brothers, ascetics, Bhats, Brahmins, and the death penalty for killing Shudras (Kisan 2009). Thus, the strict caste system implemented by Jayasthiti Malla in Nepal was established by King Ram Shah of Gorkha.

King Ram Shah of the Gorkha kingdom had mentioned in his edict or decree in that kingdom, "If I am bound, I will walk in four castes, and whoever does not walk in my children will be punished by the king who touches a stone" (Wosti 2006). On the basis of this, even in the Gorkha state, it seems that efforts have been made to strictly enforce the rules established by Jayasthiti Malla. In the Gorkha state and its environs, the caste system had been in place since before the regime of Ram Shah.

In medieval Nepal, after King Jayasthiti Malla re-classified Nepali society on the basis of the Varnashram system, the Brahmin class took the social leadership in the society. But the existing castes in the Nepali society at that time were Brahmin, Joshi, Karmacharya, Malla, Thakur, Dev, Thaku, Mahapal, Patravansh, Pal, Rawat, Verma, Rajbanshi, Amatya, Kumhar, Mulmi, Bharo, Bhavo, Singh, Lavatbhaju, Bharo Shrestha, Bhandel, Bhandari, Tharpa, Thapaju, Jowar, Praman Bharo, Pradhan, Desh Pradhan, Duware, Parman, Thari, Rawal, Lewa, Sayaju, Kutu, Dhuj, Dhanwantari, Gatha, Mayi, Gopalik, Jyapu, Banmalakar, Salmi, Prajapati, Dhovi, Kasahi, Kushle, Jogi, etc. (Bazaracharya 1999). Among such cases, Upadhyaya, Brahmin, Dravid Bhatt Brahmin, Maithil Brahmin, Bengali Brahmin, and Khas Brahmin had a high position and deep influence in the medieval Nepali society. At that time Upadhyaya Brahmins were Rajguru. Dravid Bhatt Brahmins migrated from South India to Nepal. Towards the end of the Medieval Age, these Brahmins even became priests of Pashupatinath. The Bengali Brahmins of Chakravarti, Bhattacharya, and Raya subtitle also had a special influence on that society. Later, those Brahmins also merged

with the Newari community of Kathmandu valley. The Maithil Brahmins of Jha and Mishra also had a good influence on society. Due to his erudition, the Malla kings of the medieval period had a profound influence on the Maithili language, art, literature, and music. Later, those Maithil Brahmins also merged into the Newari society. In addition to this, Khas Brahmins with surnames like Pantha and Ojha also had a good influence on society (Sharma 2001). In the medieval Nepali Hindu society understanding, the Brahmin community had a high ranked, as did also the Buddhists Gurubhaju, Guruju, and Bajracharya. They were also Buddhist Brahmin near the same position as Hindu Brahman.

The caste system has had a profound effect on Nepali medieval society. Looking at the current geographical situation of Nepal, the influence of Khas Aryans in the far west, Mongolians like Magar and Gurung in the west, Newari community in Kathmandu Valley, Tamangs in hilly areas of north of Kathmandu Valley, Kirants in eastern hills, and Maithili in Eastern Terai. The influence of the people and the influence of the Tharu caste is found in mostly the Western Terai. Based on this, similar castes and their majority areas have been found in Nepali society since the medieval period. Due to the influence of the caste system prevailing among the Hindus living in Nepal in the medieval period, caste was also established among the people who believe in Buddhism. The medieval Nepali society was formed after Jayasthiti Malla in four Varnas, 64 castes, and 725 sub-castes and clans. In Nepali society, the social chain of Varnas and castes were developing. During the time, it was a social rule to do deeds according to the caste. In medieval Nepali society, the behavior of inter-caste groups was developed. Provision was made to determine the marital relationship from the same caste system (Shrestha 2009). Thus, in the medieval period, the caste system and rules were to be obeyed by the king and the people, and those who violated that law would be punished.

CONCLUSION

The caste system has been maintained in Nepal since the ancient period, Ethnic bigotry was not maintained in the ancient society as the then rulers of Nepal had not made such strict rules regarding caste. But by the Middle period, the caste system was strictly enforced in that society. As a result, especially in the Kathmandu Valley, occupations were determined on the basis of caste. The professionals are given special importance while maintaining this caste system. Even the names of many

castes at that time were based on occupation. In order for these castes to carry out their occupations in an orderly manner, a rule was made which was not allowed to be adopted by the people of another caste. Due to this, the occupations of every caste in the society were ensured. Due to such an arrangement, the profession became a technology. As the elders of the society imparted technical knowledge and skills towards the profession to the young and adult generation of their own family, it was possible to produce or manufacture all the necessary things in the society. This system provided full employment to the society and there was no need to import consumer goods from abroad or other places on the basis of the exchange system. Although some negative effects of that caste system remain at the present time. The caste system proved to be a back bone for the society and the country also became economically prosperous in the medieval period. Proof of this is the opportunity to know the medieval Kathmandu Valley as a city with more temples than houses, more idols than people, and more festivals than days.

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