



## Caste Hierarchy among Hill-Originated Caste Group: A Sociological Study of Kapan Area of Kathmandu Valley

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### **Abstract**

Caste is a major social stratification system in Nepali society. It is a part of social discourse. It has become a burning issue of contemporary Nepali society. In this context, this research aims to identify the caste-based hierarchy in the area of Kapan under the Kathmandu valley. The study followed descriptive and analytical research designs through the qualitative research approach. Qualitative data were adhered using case study and content analysis methods. Thus, primary data were collected from twenty-three case study narratives detailing individuals' experiences with caste based hierarchical relationship in their daily lives. The field study for data collection was carried out in July 2025. Those cases were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Additionally, key informants' interview method was applied to collect and cross check the information of cases. The content analysis method had been applied as the thematic form to analyze both primary and secondary data. The findings of the study show the continuation of caste hierarchy to shape social relations, albeit with a shift away from more overt forms of de facto exclusion and a greater emphasis on negotiation. Caste relations in Kapan reveal a pattern of 'continuity within change', while the ideology of purity and hierarchy remains culturally powerful, the everyday realities of enforcement have softened. This study contributes to a better understanding of how caste-based structures encounter, adapt, and evolve in urban settings.

**Keywords:** caste hierarchy, exclusion, modernization, social change, social inequality

### **1. Introduction**

Caste is a hereditary system where birth determines the hierarchy, occupation and food habits of the individual. According to Be'teille (1965), a caste can be defined as a small

and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a way of life (which may sometimes include traditional pursuit of a particular occupation). Caste is usually associated with more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system. As such, we can say that caste is a hierarchical system of mutual social groups. In a way, it continues to exist independently or as separate identity. This identity is characterized by caste-based occupation prescriptions, the requirement of hereditary membership in caste and the preferred endogamous form of marriages for members of each caste. The caste norms regulate and prescribe food habits of all members of each caste. This useful element helps preserve the atomic identity of each caste group. Each caste has its own meticulously defined rules regarding the type of food that a person belonging to that caste can accept (Ghurye, 1961). The distinct identity retained by each caste group has however a relative significance. A caste receives its independent identity only by posing itself as a distinct category in relations to other castes. The structural principle of presence of distinctive opposition in each caste group also is an element of a large system (Dumont, 1970). Caste, in this context, is a system of social organization. A Hindu society, therefore, can be perceived as a social system, in which mouth is Brahman, arms and hands are Chhetri, thigh and legs respectively Vaishya and Sudra. It is ideal thought to unite entire members of society (Adhikari, 2013).

The major features of caste include segmental division of society, hierarchy, restriction on feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections of caste, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, restriction on marriage (Ghurye, 2011). Caste has remarkably resilient and complex social hierarchies. They have profoundly impacted social relations, power structures, and daily activities in South Asia. Anthropologists view caste as a hierarchical social system, regulated by the principles of purity and pollution in India. Dumont (1980) argued that the caste is fundamentally a religious and ideological system where the core organizing principle of society is hierarchy rather than equality. His structuralist reading underscored the contrast between pure and impure, offering an essential analytical framework, which could help position caste as a total social fact and not just an economic-political arrangement.

Later scholars, however, critiqued such essentialist readings by situating caste in historic and political processes. According to Dirks, colonial rule was a crucial force in this reification and rigidifying of caste categories in censuses, legal codes, and administrative forms. Dirks states that modern-day caste is not merely an ancient arrangement, but is in fact that colonial knowledge and governance that transformed flexible social identities into fixed hierarchies, constructed and policed by the bureaucracy. The perspective of the past challenged the assumption of caste being eternal. Village-level and empirical studies have further helped examine the relationship between caste, class and power. Beteille (1965) has shown that caste must be understood in relation to economic relations and political authority. His research found that enhanced land, education, and political participation have changed traditional caste hierarchies although caste continues to govern access to resources and social esteem. The changing socio-economic contexts illustrate how dynamic caste can be. In the world of caste studies, there is a shift to viewing caste as a living system rather than a dying system. According to Jodhka (2012), caste is not disappearing: it is manifesting in new forms in urban space, labour markets, education, and democratic politics. Today, caste discrimination is less overt than earlier, as untouchability practices get increasingly dropped by the elite.

Counter-narratives have developed due to Critical and Dalit-centered scholarship. According to Ambedkar (2008), caste is one of the most radical critiques of our time as it is antithetical to democracy, equality and social justice. According to him, caste was not merely a division of labor but a division of laborers based on endogamy and religious sanction. Ambedkar's writings serve as a key reference point for anti-caste activism and contemporary

Dalit movements. Research through ethnographic setting has further informed marginalized caste groups' lived experiences. Gorringer (2016) documented how Dalits negotiate identity, dignity and political participation in everyday life. The studies argue that Dalits are empowered and can resist the caste oppression of Hinduism.

The investigation of caste hierarchy among hill-originated caste groups in Kapan has important sociological consequences. Kapan, as a fast rising urban area, offers an important backdrop for investigating how urbanization, migration, and modernization affect traditional caste hierarchies. Investigating this situation helps us understand how caste-based structures persist, adapt, and evolve in urban settings. Furthermore, research in such environments helps to determine how caste-related activities and social relations manifest in current society. This research focused on the hilly originated caste group Parvate and its stratification. Parvate is an alternative name to refer to the hilly originated caste group. The primary caste groups in the hill region of Nepal are Brahmin, Thakuri, Kshetri, Sanyasi along with Dalits (Kami, Damai, Sharki, Badi, Gaine). Currently, these groups are constitutionally marked as “Khas Aryan”. Scholars state that the Vedic Aryans came into the hills of Nepal much later. The Khas Aryans entered Nepal from Central Asia, passing through Gilgit, crossing the Mahakali River of West Nepal, and then spreading to all over Nepal from west to east (Ghimire, 2023). In the beginning, these Khas Aryans did not accept a caste system, and the surname of the current Khas group was originated from Karnali region and Kumau state of India. The Khas Aryan group does not recognize the Vaishya Varna or caste group, because Khas does not want to recognize themselves in lower position as Vaishya because they recognize themselves as upper hierarchy as Bahun, Thakuri and Chettri ( Adhikari, 2013). The Parvate community possesses a caste system. They make up a great majority of the population, both in numbers and culture. The Brahmins of Parvate are the highest ranked Brahmins of Nepal. The royal family derives from the caste of Thakuri. A considerable portion of higher officials and army officer derives from the caste of Chettri. It is well known that the foundation of present-day state of Nepal was the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley in 1769. This work is attributed to Higher Parvate castes. It is directly due to this fact that the Parvate settlements nowadays cover the whole midland of Nepal (Hofer, 2004). A more vigorous attempt to enhance the legal support for the entrenchment of caste based organization of society was made by the Nepali state during mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He was the Shree 3 Maharaja, Prime Minister Jung Bahadur who promulgated Muluki Ain (civil Code) in 1854 in the period of king Surendra through the formulation of Muluki Ain in 1854. It tried to accomplish this task in two different ways; at one level the provision of the code attempted to expand the process of Hinduization by carving the way to incorporate all ethnic categories into the caste system (Ghimire 2023). For this purpose, the code transformed the traditional categories of the Varna system into five broader caste categories as in the table below.

**Table 1:** *Caste classification of the MulukiAin (1854)*

Caste category	Caste groups incorporated in the category
1 wearers of the wholly cord (tagadhari)	Hill brahman (Upadhaayabrahaman,Rajput (thakuri), jyasibrahaman, Chettri , Dewbhaju (newar Brahmin), indianbrhamin, ascetic sects (syanyasi, etc ), lower jyaisi, various newar caste
2 caste group of non enslavablealcohol drinkers (namasinyaMatwali)	Magar, Gurung , Sunuwar, some other Newar caste
3 caste group of the enslaveable alcohol drinkers (masinyaMatwali)	Bhote, Chepang, Kumal, Hayu, Tharu, Gharti(descendants of freed slaves)
4 impure, but touchable caste	Kasai ( Newar butcher), Kusle (Newar musician ),

(paninachalnechoichitohalnunaparnya )	Kulu (Newar tanners ), Musalman, Mlecha (European)
5)Untouchable Caste (paninachalnyachoichitohalnarny)	Kami (blacksmith),sarki(tanners,shoemakers),kadara(stemmi an from unions between kami and sarki),Damai(tailors and musicians),Gaine (minstrels),Badi (musician),Pode(Newar skinners and fisherman), chame (Newar scavengers)

**Source:** Hofer, 1979

Table 1 indicates traditional hierarchical ordering of caste classification of Nepali society, particularly with respect to the hill-originated caste groups. It is organized along several lines: ritual purity, occupational specialization alcohol drinking practices and historical ideas of enslavability or untouchability. The first category is the Tagadhari or ‘wearers of the sacred thread’. These groups together those who are ritually pure elite hill Brahmins, Chhetris, and ascetic sects. These groups have historically held high social status, political power, and economic advantage. The sacred thread in itself is a mark or emblem of ritual authority and orthodoxy of Hindus norms and makes them superior. The use of ritual markers here denotes more than just economic or occupational status but shows social hierarchy.

The second and third categories NamasinyaMatwali (those who consume alcohol, which is not enslaving) and MasinyaMatwali (those who consume enslaving alcohol) are complicated evaluation of the social and the moral. Both category include people that drink alcohol, yet there is a difference in their history of exploitability. The MasinyaMatwali were seen as exploitable, meaning they could be enslaved. This indicates how economic dependency and social exclusion were further reinforced through colonial or pre-modern legal and social systems. The categorization reveals that caste status was not just a question of ritual purity along with ceremonial observance but also one of economic servitude and moral conduct. As for the fourth category (Paninachalne Choi Chito HalnuNaparnya), it contains occupationally “polluting” castes like butcher, tanner, musician and foreign or outsider groups (like Mlecha). The ritualistic purity of these castes may have been tainted but the proximity of other castes was still acceptable. Thus, caste hierarchies were not absolute barriers but graded systems. The presence of occupationally essential groups shows the functional aspect of caste in which social hierarchy coexists with economic necessity.

The fourth category comprises ritually untouchable groups who were traditionally severely socially excluded. Blacksmithing and tanning, scavenging and playing music were all considered polluting by traditional standards, thereby becoming systematically marginalized. The position of this group reveals how ritual and occupational dimensions are combined to buttress social inequality. Further, it highlights the ongoing social and economic vulnerability of certain castes.

Although the caste classification table provides useful means for understanding traditional hierarchies, it cannot explain the dynamic and real social-world of today’s hill-originated communities. When it captures ritual, occupational and moral aspects of caste, it does not show social change, intra-caste differences or intersectional inequalities. As such any research based on this framework should be supplemented with empirical observation and contextualization as caste relations are in a constant flux. Intra- and inter-relations within Parbate caste groups are still understudied. In this context, this paper focused to analyze the hierarchical relationship between caste groups of Kapan community of Kathmandu district.

### 1.1 Objective and Methodology

This research aimed to identify the caste hierarchy in the specific area of Kapan under

the Kathmandu valley. The study utilized in descriptive and analytical research designs through the qualitative research approach. The case study and content analysis methods are used to collect the data under the qualitative research design (Adhikari, 2020a, 2020b). Hence, qualitative data was gathered using case study and content analysis methods, with primary data collected from twenty-three case study narratives detailing individuals' experiences with caste based hierarchical relationship in their daily lives in the Kapan area of Kathmandu valley. These cases were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Additionally, key informants' interview method was applied to collect and to cross check the information of cases. Similarly, secondary data was drawn from previous research studies, reports, academic papers, research articles, and blog entries to provide supporting documentation for the research. The content analysis method is more useful to analyze the data in this context (Adhikari et al., 2024a, Adhikari et al, 2024b) Thus, content analysis was employed as a method to gathered the qualitative data, drawing from various sources, and providing a helpful tool to analyze the gathered data. Both primary and secondary data were analyzed using the content analysis method. The study was conducted in strict accordance with research ethics. All participants gave informed consent and were promised that their information would be kept confidential, and that their participation in the study was voluntary. Personal identifiers were deleted from transcripts and datasets to guarantee the participants' confidentiality. The acquired data were utilised purely for academic reasons, and the study adhered to the ethical norms and standards generally employed in international social science research.

## **1.2 Theoretical Orientation**

Using Louis Dumont's (1970) fundamental paradigm, I have tried to analyze and understand the caste systems and intergroup connections in the Kapan. Furthermore, the modernization viewpoint is employed to comprehend the context of caste structure transformation.

Purity and impurity are the two fundamental concepts that organize the whole framework of Indian caste society, according to Dumont (1970) in his book *Homo Hierarchicus*. Only Hindu values serve as its compass, with Brahmins at the top. While the bottom is occupied by untouchables. Religion controls the political and economic spheres of social life. The concepts of purity and impurity are used to express religious principles. Since the Brahmins are the pinnacle of purity that Hindus may achieve, the Indian caste system's hierarchy is always founded on this Brahminical framework. The modernization hypothesis has aided in the analysis of changes in the economy, education, social structure, caste hierarchy, and people's conceptions of untouchability and inter-caste relationships.

The process of modernization started in 1789 with the French Revolution. This revolution had a huge influence on many civilizations and brought about a lot of beneficial developments. The western world was transformed from a predominantly agrarian to an overwhelmingly industrial society shortly after this revolution, which was the culmination of the British Industrial Revolution. For the industrial jobs available in the factories, many people deserted farms and agricultural labourers. A lengthy succession of technical advancements changed the industries themselves. In order to supply the various services required by industry and the developing capitalist economic system, large economic bureaucracies emerged. A free marketplace where the many outputs of an industrial system could be exchanged was ideal under the capitalist economic system. While the bulk of people in this system worked long hours for meagre pay, a small few made large profits. (Ritzier, 1992).

## 2. Analysis of Caste Group Hierarchy

In Nepal, all caste groups acknowledge the highest and lowest levels of social hierarchy, represented by the Brahman and Sudra Varna, respectively (Sharma, 2004). Seven caste groups have been identified in Kapan. The caste groups were classified as upper and lower. The acceptance of water, cooked rice, and Dal from one group to another, however, is the fundamental criterion of hierarchy (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** *Organization of Hill- Caste Groups in the Research*

Category of Hierarchy	Name of Caste Group
Upper (Panichalne)	Brahman, Thakuri and Kshetriya and Sanyasi
Lower (Paaninchalne)	Kami/Sunar,Sarki, and Damai

**Source:** *Field Survey 2025*

As it is given in Table 2, the caste groups Brahman, Thakuri, Kshetriya and Sanyasi are under the first category. In the area of study, these groups are also called high castes. Brahmans being the top of the hierarchy accepts water only from high castes group. They don't accept Bhat or Dal from any other caste. At the same time, member of the second caste is Thakuri and likewise Kshetriya and Sanyasi are in third and fourth hierarchical position. They disallow Bhat but do take water from people of the high caste. Sudra is the fourth caste in the Varna system. Sudras are those who don't wear 'Janai' ceremonially. According to civil code 1854, they were known as Achhut (see the table 1). And now days they are referred as Dalits. In Nepal, there is classification of all hill originated dalits and they are Kaami, Damai, Saarki, Baadi and Gaine (Dahal, 2003). But in the study area, only three groups of Dalits are present. They are Kaami, Damai and Saarki. The caste system in Nepal was officially established during the Muluki Ain of 1854, which formally classified people into hierarchically graded groups based on perceived purity and contamination (Hofer, 2004). This codification strengthened socioeconomic inequality, occupational segregation, and endogamy, particularly among hill-originated castes like Brahmins (Bahuns), Thakuris, Chhetris, Sanyasi and Dalits. Individuals are arranged hierarchically into several graded endogamous groupings under the caste system of social organization. The examination of Dalit marginalisation in Nepal identifies economic, social, and political constraints that hinder their progress (Budhathoki,2025).

Men dominate decision-making in higher caste households (Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri, and Sanyasi), accounting for 60% of total household decisions, while women and joint decision-making (by both spouses) account for only 20%. Lower caste (Dalit) homes, on the other hand, show a more balanced pattern: men continue to lead in 48% of situations. It has been seen that women make decisions on their own in 36% of households, and both spouses share decision-making in 16%. This shows that Dalit homes, motivated by economic interdependence and necessity, are more likely to involve women in decision-making than higher caste households, where conventional patriarchal standards are rigid.

### 2.1 Hierarchy between Brahmans

Brahmans from the hills, also known as Bahuns or Upadhyay Brahmans, rank highest in the traditional caste hierarchy of Nepal. According to Dumont (1980; Sharma 2001), priests are regarded as higher up in the status order because they possess ritual purity and priestly functions due to historical links with Hindu religious authority. Over the centuries, Brahmins were priests, teachers, and advisors of kings and aristocrats, positioning them centrally in the ritual and political spheres (Hofer & Ramirez, 1998). According to the Nepali caste system, Upadhyay Brahmans are at the top. They have Common surnames including

Ghimire, Adhikari, Koirala, Neupane, Poudel, Subedi, Rijal, Pandey, Panta, Bista etc. Mainly, Brahman of hill can be divided into two types:

1. Upadhya (Purbiya and Kumai)
2. Jaisi

Upadhya Brahmins are the highest-ranking and most orthodox subgroup. They are traditionally responsible for performing Vedic rituals, temple ceremonies, and Yagayas. They practise stringent ritual purity, which includes vegetarianism, daily religious chores, and caste boundaries. All male members are supposed to participate in the upanayan (holy thread ritual), and the group frequently practise endogamous marriage, shunning unions with Jaisi or lower-status Brahmins. According to tradition, children born to married Brahmin couples are known as Upadhyayas. Their expertise lies in Sanskrit scriptures, Vedas, and advanced spiritual studies, establishing them as the leading religious authorities in Nepalese Hindu society. Case-1 demonstrates that Upadhyay Brahmins are the most ritually pure Brahmins of the hills. Their endogamy, ritual code, and diet are said to be stricter than that of other Brahmins and lower caste groups. The power of the priests is essentially the power of ritual. They perform community ceremonies with varying degrees of sacred power, such as weddings, death, and similar events. These claims give them a symbolic upper hand over the other Brahmins, Chhetris, and even powerful Matwali (Janjati) and Dalit castes. On the other hand, Jaisi Brahmins are considered lower-ranking Brahmins. Children born to a Brahmin man and a widowed Brahmin woman, or to a Brahmin woman who had not finished all of her life-cycle rites or who had remarried, were frequently classified as Jaisi rather than Upadhya due to perceived deviations in ceremonial purity (Sharma, 2004). They are known for their knowledge of astrology (Jyotish), Tantra, and practical religious activities like family pujas, burial ceremonies, and astrological consultations. Case-2 (Jyoti Brahmin) explains that Jaisi Brahmins have a comparatively lower ritual status than Upadhyay and they serve in smaller religious family pujas, burial ceremonies, and astrological consultations. He further says: I generate fifty thousand from astrological consultations. However, they also wear the sacred thread. Jaisis are often more relaxed about ceremonial purity, with some families eating meat and bending certain dietary or religious rules.

These Jaisi and Upadhyayas are further divided into smaller categories, such as Purbiya and Kumai. One of the key informants from Brahmins states that Brahmins from Kedarbhumi, Khecharadri, and Manasbhumi are known as Purbiyas. The Doteli, Kumauni, and Baitadeli Bahuns of the Malavas (Mallas) who migrate from the West (Paschimpur) to the Himalayas are called as Kumai. Both of these (Kumai and Purbiya) have their own Jaisi or Upadhyayas.

## **2.2 Hierarchy between Brahman and Thakuri**

In the traditional caste hierarchy, Thakuris are classified just below Upadhyay Brahmins and beside Chhetris in the twice-born (Tagadhari) group, which provides them a high social standing and access to ritual privileges such as wearing the sacred thread. Case-3 illustrates that they are superior to Jaisi Brahmin because Jaisi Brahmin became impure. Children born to a Brahmin man and a widowed Brahmin woman or to a Brahmin woman who had not finished all of her life-cycle rites or who had remarried are known as Jaisi. Despite their elevated status, they are fewer in number than Brahmins and Chhetris, and their elite identity are frequently linked to property ownership, military service, and historical prestige (Dahal 2003).

In a hill area, an Upadhyay Brahmin family and a Thakuri (Rajput) family belonging to high social status differ in their sources of status. The Brahmin family has the ability to perform rituals connected to life, and this gives him respect. The Thakuris, a ruling/warrior family, takes prestige from political history, landownership and claim of royal descent (Bista

1991; Hofer and Ramirez 1998). Though the rituals at public religious functions are sponsored by the Thakuri household, the officiating priest is an Upadhyay Brahmin. This signifies the ritual superiority of Brahmins over Kshatriya groups despite the latter's political prestige (Dumont, 1980). This shows that when Brahmins dominate symbolically, one may find Thakuris are dominating economically or politically and vice versa. The case-4 (a woman from Thakuri family married with Brahmin) claimed her family's caste positioning to be that, indicating locally informed interpretations of status positioning. She noted, "My husband is Brahmin, I am Thakuri, my daughter is Hamal, which is Thakuri". According to local understanding, Hamal is consistent with Thakuri, which is associated with Kshatriya or ruling-line prestige. Based on the respondent, her daughter's identification Hamal put her under the Thakuri category which she regarded as a higher caste, socially and politically, in comparison to other groups like Jyaisi Brahmin or certain Chhetri lineages. The case seeks to challenge the rigid textual model of caste hierarchy which uniformly places Brahmins above Kshatriya groups. Through mythologies of royal descent and warrior ancestry, the Thakuris are said to claim superiority (historical-political) over the Brahmins' (ritual) superiority (Bista, 1991; Hofer & Ramirez, 1998). The Hamal identity embodies a blend of Brahmin purity and Thakuri prestige and shows how caste identity can be negotiated through marriage and local interpretation rather than determined solely by classical Varna principles.

According to the key informant, caste is not as straightforward as being the father's by birth but is shaped, instead, by a politics of status, clan recognition, and community acceptance. To illustrate, the practical caste hierarchy is socially recognized and historically remembered, not merely dictated by normative religious rules (Dumont, 1980; Sharma, 2001). This valuable insight reminds us that, at least in relation to Brahmins, Thakuris and Chhetris, intra-elite caste dynamics are more fluid and contested than one often generally assumes. While ritual theory may rank Brahmins at the top, narratives concerning local power, land control, and royal lineage allow Thakuri-affiliated identities such as Hamal to claim high prestige, even at times superseding the status of some Brahmins subgroups.

### **2.3 Hierarchy between Brahman and Kshetry**

The Chhetri community, also known as Kshetri or Chhettri, is Nepal's largest caste group and is traditionally linked with the Kshatriya (warrior) Varna in Hindu civilization. Historically, Chhetris have held important positions in Nepal's military, administrative, and political systems. According to the 2021 Nepal census, the Chhetri population is 4,796,995, accounting for 16.45% of the total population, making them the country's most populous caste group. Chhetris are part of the larger Khas Arya group, which includes the Bahun (Hill Brahmins), Thakuri, and Sanyasi/Dasnami as well as hill-dalit groups. Traditionally, Chhetris are placed below Jaisi Brahmins in the hierarchy of caste, which have been classified as Tagadhari or twice-born. Thus, Chhetri obtain high social standing and enjoy ritual privileges like a sacred thread. They mostly speak Nepali (Khas-Kura) and practise Hinduism. Chhetri are mainly of two types; *Jharrochhetri* (pure Chhetri) and *Matwali Chhetri*. *Jharro Chhetri* is those who wear sacred thread (Janai). Traditionally, they don't consume alcohol. On the other hand, *Matwali Chhetri* are those who don't wear sacred thread as well as consume alcohol. Side by side, *Khatri/KhatriChhetri* is also one of the categories of chhetri. One of the key informants has mentioned that origin behind Khatri/KC is union or marriage between Brahman and Chhetri or water acceptable caste/ethnic group like Newar, Magar, and Gurung except untouchable caste. On fieldwork, there appeared a noteworthy case that shows that caste identity of hill-originated groups are not strictly determined by scriptural codes, but that local recognition, lineage politics, and negotiation shapes it.

The case-5 (pertains to an individual whose father is from the Brahmin caste and whose mother is from the Chhetri caste; instead of being identified strictly as Brahmin or

Chhetri, and called Khatri Chhetri (KC), states he has a status recognized as Chhetri. In classical Hindu varna ideology, it is assumed that caste is patrilineal, i.e., children take on their father's caste. Yet, local practices in the hills of Nepal show that status transmission can be flexible, especially when high-status groups like Brahmins and Chhetris intermarry. In this case, the father's Brahmin identity lent origins to a family of ritual prestige, and the mother's Chhetri lineage linked the family to Kshatriya ancestry, a lineage linked to rulers (Bista, 1991; Sharma, 2001).

People identified the person as a Khatri Chhetri (KC), which is the high-ranking Chhetri that usually make claims of noble or mixed high-caste lineage. Consequently, the KC identity acted as an intermediary category, enabling the individual to maintain high social status yet keeping them from the Brahmin ritual role. He did not undertake priestly functions similar to Upadhyay Brahmins, but socially he enjoyed equality with Chhetri elite with marriage ties and communal leadership. Chhetris have historically had significant power in Nepal's government and military. Many of Nepal's prime ministers and high-ranking military personnel are from the Chhetri community. In modern Nepal, Chhetris continue to play important positions in politics, government services, and the military. Their long history of involvement in leadership and administration has helped them maintain their importance in Nepali society.

#### **2.4 Hierarchy between Brahman and Sanyasi**

The Brahmins (Bahuns) and Sanyasi (ascetic renouncers) relationship shows a unique hierarchy as they show two different models of status. One determined by the ability to achieve ritual purity through birth and the other through being the renouncer (sanyasi or sadhu).

In the traditional hill hierarchy, Brahmins, especially Upadhyay Brahmins, occupy the highest hereditary caste position. They got their status as birth-related ritual purity; perform Vedic rituals with authority, governance over life-cycle ceremonies (birth, marriage, death), household priests and religious specialists role. Due to ascription by birth, Brahmins are viewed as permanently and ritually superior in the hierarchical structure of orthodox Hindu society (Dumont, 1980; Sharma, 2001). Their power works chiefly in the sphere of domestic and community ritual. In Nepal, there are ten different forms of Sanyasis, which are categorised as Giri, Puri, Bharati, Parbat, Ban, Saraswati, Ashram, Sagar, Tirtha, and Aranya. Giri is at the top of the hierarchy, whereas Aranya is at the bottom of Sanyasi's hierarchy (Mishra, 2014).

Case-6 belongs to Sannyasi community, and is presently serving as a civil servant of Nepal. He resides in a privately owned bungalow in Kapan, which is located in the Kathmandu region. As a government employee, his professional status provides him with a steady income, social security, and urban middle-class prestige. He is engaged in family life, he owns property, and he leaves property by will fully integrated into the socio-economic structure of mainstream society. He mentioned, "We are same as Brahmin/Chhetri in the caste hierarchy" during a talk. Despite its origins of renunciation, Ram Prasad identifies strongly as a twice-born caste. This statement indicates an effort by the Sannyasi community to position itself within the higher ranks of the Hindu caste order, rather than outside or beyond caste as would classical religious theory. The Sanyasi is traditionally one that renounces worldly or secular life and gives up any caste identity to seek liberation. In modern times, certain individuals and groups claiming a Sanyasi identity live as householders, participate in state institutions, and assert their place within a caste hierarchy.

In modern times, certain individuals and groups claiming a Sannyasi identity live as householders, participate in state institutions, and assert their place within a caste hierarchy. The Case-6 has highlighted the case of household Sannyasi is reflective of a huge

contradiction of social life. Sanyasi People who are venerated as renunciant spiritual figures live as caste-identified householders with property, family responsibilities and social hierarchy. With a double status comes confusion about the authentic meaning of asceticism. There is no clearer issue regarding the blurring of lines between sacred renunciation and worldly engagement. Certainly, it allows for a religious aura along with material and caste privileges. Due to the above factors, the moral credibility of spiritual authority may get undermined, caste distinctions get indirectly reinforced in religious forms, and the young in particular start questioning the authenticity. The combined identity of these Sannyasis eventually highlights a larger tension between persisting social structures and changing religious ideas in modern times.

A key informant belonging to the Sanyasi community claimed that Sanyasis have a characteristic social and religious position since they are members of a religious order of ascetics. As per the informant, a Sanyasi actually a person renounces his family, personal belongings and previous caste system and undergoes a metamorphosis. This transition symbolically dies worldly life and rebirths in the path of religion, devoted living, disciplined upbringing and mystery. The Sanyasi renounces household and social duties in order to devote himself entirely to religious exercise, meditation, and liberation. Moreover, as per the informant, this renunciation creates a social space for the Sanyasis. Sanyasis are seen to be outside the caste system unlike householders whose identity is derived from their caste, lineage and occupation.

## **2.5 Caste hierarchy between Brahman and Vishwakarma (Kami)**

The caste structure of Nepal regarded Brahmins as the highest rituals holder and the guardian of scripture. Brahmins are also ritual life mediators. On the other hand, the Vishwakarma castes, i.e., the Kamis were classified as the “service” or occupational castes. Their contributions were economically necessary but socially deemed inferior. The Kami were placed in a hierarchical order that restricted them from participating in Brahmin religious activities. They were barred from the temple and often settled on the fringe of villages. A Brahmin family relies on a Kami blacksmith for agricultural tools, yet avoids accepting water or cooked food from them due to notions of ritual pollution. The Kami household provides essential services but remains socially marginalized, often living in a separate settlement area (Onta, 2003). Even when the Kami family achieves economic improvement through wage labor or migration, ritual distance may continue in marriage and commensality (Sharma, 2001). On the other hand, changed have been found in the study area. Hence, we have found Intergenerational Change in Caste-Based Interaction.

A case study on intergenerational change in Caste-Based Interaction (case-7), presents the life-history account of an eighty-year-old male respondent from the Kaami (Vishwakarma) community. An examination of caste relations over the years depicting change in everyday interactions between Dalits and high caste groups (Brahmin and Chhetri). Around 40 years ago, there was caste discrimination and social rigidity in the Kapan village, remembers the respondent. He recalls that the atmosphere was more relaxed than the strictness during the Rana regime (1846–1951). According to him, people’s so-called caste hierarchy was a public enactment through embodied behavior and ritual etiquette in everyday encounters.

He further clarifies, “If we were walking on the way and Brahmins or other high-born people came from the opposite side, we had to step aside and make way for them. We must also greet Jadau in a respectable way.” Such acts were not just gestures of politeness; they were expected social performances of deference that reaffirmed caste hierarchy in everyday life. Withdrawing physically from the path was a display of ritualistic inferiority while the obligatory verbal greeting acknowledged higher caste status. The respondent places his

experience within a larger historical framework. The Rana period is noted as an era when the caste was enforced extremely rigidly and the Dalits could move very little. Another case of economic mobility and status reconfiguration of a Hill Dalit Entrepreneur (case-7) also sheds lights on reshaping everyday status. Mr. Shyam Rasaili, (Pseudonym) a goldsmith from a hill-origin Dalit (Vishwakarma) community has established a successful jewelry business in Kapan, Kathmandu. He has a bungalow to live in, a private vehicle to use and reports a monthly household income of around NPR 500,000–700,000 from family business. His work as a goldsmith, usually associated with the Vishwakarma caste cluster, has aided considerable upward economic mobility and urban middle-class integration. Despite being from a backward class, Mr. Rasaili, thinks his economic capital has improved his social status within the local context. When asked, he quoted Nepali proverb [Chhangedisabaimeri, chhainangedisabaitedhi] to show how wealth shapes social respect and relationship. His reflection shows that having material success can renegotiate perceptions attached to one's caste, although this recognition may not be unconditional. Such recognition may be status-dependent rather than of structural equality.

Around the 1980s the caste hierarchy had not disappeared but had become less marked. At present, the view is relatively liberal with less explicit practice of enforce physical and verbal subordination. This comparative memory indicates that the manifestation of the caste system as public humiliation or insult has gradually waned over the years.

The above narratives show how caste hierarchy was historically reproduced through everyday public space micro-level bodily discipline and linguistic norms. People are required to step aside, use honorifics, such as 'sir' and 'madam', which institutionalize inequality not through law but code. Similar practices did not only reinforce Brahmins and other high castes' symbolic superiority but also normalize Dalit subordination. During the mid-20th century, the Government of Nepal discontinued formal caste grading and in 1963 legally abolished the caste system, criminalizing caste discrimination, including practices of untouchability. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 further recognizes Dalits, including Kaamis, as a marginalized community entitled to legal protection and affirmative action in education, civil service, and political representation (Government of Nepal, 2015). The respondent pointed out that legal reform, democratization, the spread of education, migration, the impact of Dalit activism, and so on has gradually weakened the caste hierarchy in social interaction. Nonetheless, according to him, the decline is comparative rather than quantitative, signifying change in shape rather than absolute transformation of caste-based inequality.

## **2.6 Hierarchies between Brahman and Pariyar (Damai)**

The Damai, also known as Pariyar is a traditional occupational Dalit caste in Nepal's hill-originated Hindu caste system. The Damai community is long known for their tailoring skills and musical abilities, particularly in the Naumati Baja ensemble (Sharma, 2019). In a mid-hill rural setting, Brahmin households centrally locate, own the majority of agricultural land, and serve as ritual specialists. The Pariyar families are located on the periphery of the village and are principally engaged in tailoring, agricultural wage labor and playing musical instruments at weddings and festivals. Although caste discrimination is legally abolished, the social interaction among these groups continues to reflect heritable hierarchy.

Their music is considered auspicious and is a prerequisite for many Hindu rites of passage, such as weddings, sacred thread ceremonies Bratabandha daily pujas (worship), and festivals. Their name is supposed to originate from the Damaha, a traditional drum instrument. They are part of the larger "Hill Dalit" group, which includes Kami, Badi, Sarki and Gaine and is recognized by the Nepalese government. In a mid-hill rural setting, their traditional occupation as tailors and musicians is considered ritually polluting, placing them in a lower caste position despite their cultural contribution (Bennett, 1983). During marriage

ceremonies, they play the role of musical and ritual helpers. Nonetheless, they are limited to performing roles. Brahmins hardly ever invite those people to eat with them, and they usually eat separately after the ceremony. It shows a trend of ritual inclusion and social exclusion. This demonstrates that occupational necessity does not translate into ritual equality. The older key informant has stated that the Pariyar settlements had erstwhile locations outside the main settlement. While physical distances have gotten shorter, boundaries of a symbol have not gotten shorter. Entry into Brahmin kitchens and prayer places is still restricted in many houses.

All younger generations, particularly those who have undertaken educational qualifications and/or experienced migrant work, view relations as more relaxed. Inter-caste contact has increased owing to shared schooling, political participation, and labor migration. All younger generations, particularly those who have undertaken educational qualifications and/or experienced migrant work, view relations as more relaxed. Inter-caste contact has increased owing to shared schooling, political participation, and labor migration. Case -8 (Tailor master at Kapan) maintains his livelihood through familial business of Tailoring. He has stated that "Currently, discrimination and the sense of untouchability are diminishing". Further he says, "People of high caste dinning in same table without feeling of untouchability in the party palace and hotels in various types of feasts". Caste discrimination is absent in the seminar dining hall, where individuals from all caste groups, including Dalits, share meals from the same food container and queue together. They also consume tea and coffee from the same teapot collaboratively. The prevalence of the inter-caste marriage system is on the rise. He sends all his children to the same school as upper caste. There is no discrimination among the children regarding food, clothing, and other facilities. The participation of Dalits in politics and other activities is increasing. Yet, marriage, commensality or inter-dining and priestly functions remain strongly caste-bound illustrating the continuing existence of symbolic boundaries.

The Brahmin-Pariyar relationship was one of dependence without equality. The Brahmins used to depend on the Pariyars for performing all essential rituals and cultural functions. But, at the same time, due to the connections through heredity pattern over time, they keep their distance socially. The basis of this distance was also a notion of purity and space and note but status. In spite of the softening of some rigid practices due to modernization, education and legal reform, caste hierarchy prevails in symbolic and cultural forms. This shows the slow and uneven transformation of social relations in contemporary Nepal.

## **2.7 Hierarchies between Brahman and Mijar (Sarki)**

Leatherwork has traditionally been associated with the Mijar caste. The Hindu purity-pollution framework sees leatherwork as ritually impure. This association contributed to the perception of Mijars as "untouchable," positioning them at the bottom of the ritual hierarchy, in direct contrast to Brahmins, who are regarded as embodiments of ritual purity. Key informant from older generation of Mijar community has mentioned that Mijars were historically denied entry into Brahmin homes, kitchens, and temples. Water sources were often segregated, and physical contact in ritual settings was avoided. While such overt restrictions have declined in many areas, subtle avoidance practices and hesitation in sharing food or ritual space still occur, particularly among older generations.

Despite shame, Mijars historically provided essential services to the village economy, including the production and repair of leather goods such as shoes, agricultural harnesses, and tools. This created a pattern of economic interdependence alongside social exclusion. Mijar (Sarki) leatherworkers and cobblers are widely regarded as the most economically marginalized of the three. Their ancient craft of making shoes and leather goods has declined

due to factory-made alternatives, and many Sarki families in Kapan now work in menial labor, garbage collection, or micro-level retail, highlighting their precarious socioeconomic status.

Case-9 has traditional family business of leather items in Kapan. He is an example of how macroeconomic developments, particularly globalization and industrialization, have altered Nepal's traditional patron-client social relationship. He says-Mijars' traditional business struggles to compete with factory-made products; their historical relationships with other castes get inferior. This shift clearly demonstrates how material and economic changes modify social relationship in a caste-based society. Their conventional craft of making shoes and leather goods has declined due to factory-made alternatives, and many Sarki families in Kapan now work in menial labor, garbage collection, or micro-level retail, highlighting their precarious socioeconomic status, Samrat mentions.

The Brahmins and Mijars have historically been organized through a framework of ritual opposition. Thus, while Brahmins are associated with purity and religious authority, Mijars have been linked to ritual impurity since they traditionally engage in leather-based occupations. Even though legal reforms and wider social change have made a dent in overt caste-based discrimination, the existence of caste is far from over. Caste continues to play a big role in social distance, marriage and culture. As a result, the relationship between Brahmin and Mijar shows that in modern Nepal caste transformation has been gradual and uneven as formal equality co-exists with strong symbolic and social boundaries.

### **3. Conclusion**

This research concludes that the caste hierarchy is continuing to shape social relations, albeit with a shift away from more overt forms of de facto exclusion and a greater emphasis on negotiation. The Brahmins are at the top of a symbolic order and are considered superior because they are associated with purity, priestly power, and control over life-cycle rituals. Similarly, Dalit groups like Kami, Damai (Pariyar), Mijar (Sarki), etc. occupy the lower end of the symbolic order. Even if legal equality is accepted, practices involving eating and drinking together as well as marriage, ritual participation, and spatial organization continue to reveal pre-existing hierarchies.

Education, migration, urbanization, integration into the market and constitutional safeguards have undermined many obvious forms of untouchability and public insult. There have been inter-caste interactions at school, work, in political spaces and in urban social settings. Economic mobility among skilled Dalit artisans and entrepreneurs, in particular, has enabled a partial renegotiation of social status. It exemplifies the growing importance of economic capital in relation to ritual ranking. Nevertheless, such mobility is often one of conditional acceptance and not structural equality. Conflicts between Brahmins, Thakuris, Chhetris, and Sanyasis indicate that caste hierarchy is not set in stone, but is continuously renegotiated by reference to local histories, marriage alliances, and claims to ritual or political prestige. Caste relations in Kapan reveal a pattern of 'continuity within change': while the ideology of purity and hierarchy remains culturally powerful, the everyday realities of enforcement have softened. The data of this are partially analog to theoretical concept of Dumo and modernization. Further research should be conducted to see whether comparable patterns of caste hierarchy and evolving inter-caste relations exist in Nepal's other fast urbanizing areas. Future research should also look into how internal migration and urban settlement patterns affect the transition of caste-based practices, particularly in suburban and metropolitan settings. Furthermore, research into the relationship between caste identity and economic mobility would help to better comprehend the current socioeconomic restructuring within marginalized caste groups.

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