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Governance and Practice Systems of Ancient Nepal: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The governance systems of ancient Nepal, characterized by their distinctive administrative, legal, and cultural structures, provide critical insights into the historical development of political organization in South Asia. This study examines the evolution of governance from the early Kirat dynasty through the Lichhavi and Malla periods, focusing on administrative frameworks, legal systems, and economic policies that shaped ancient Nepali society. Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach, including the analysis of historical texts, archaeological evidence, and ancient scriptures, the research explores how these systems functioned and adapted over time. The findings reveal a complex and nuanced system of rule rooted in indigenous traditions, yet responsive to broader regional dynamics. Moreover, the study highlights the long-standing influence of these early governance models on Nepal's contemporary socio-political structures. By situating ancient Nepal within the larger context of South Asian history, the article contributes to scholarly discourse on state formation, legal traditions, and administrative evolution. This historical perspective offers valuable implications for understanding the foundations of modern governance in the region.

Keywords: Ancient Nepal, governance systems, Kirat dynasty, administrative practices, state formation

Introduction

The study of ancient governance provides crucial insights into the sociopolitical evolution of civilizations and their institutional frameworks. In the case of Nepal, a nation with a deep and layered historical trajectory, examining the governance and practice systems of its ancient period unveils how traditional authority, administrative mechanisms, and socio-religious values coalesced to form early models of statecraft. Despite the scarcity of extensive historical records, archaeological findings, inscriptions, and chronicles such as the Gopalarajavamsavali and Colophon records provide substantial evidence to reconstruct Nepal's early political organization (Slusser, 1982).

Ancient Nepal's governance system evolved through several historical phases, notably during the Kirata, Lichhavi, and Malla periods, each marking significant administrative and ideological developments. The Kirata period (c. 800 BCE – 300 CE), often mythologized in local lore, is believed to have consisted of tribal confederacies, where leadership was selected on the basis of valor and wisdom rather than hereditary succession (Regmi, 1975). With the

advent of the Lichchhavi dynasty (c. 400 –750 CE), a more structured monarchical system emerged, featuring centralized power supported by bureaucratic institutions such as the Sabhā (council) and Amatyas (ministers) (Sharma, 2014).

The Lichchhavi period marked the beginning of codified laws and taxation systems. Royal edicts inscribed on stone and copper plates—such as the inscriptions of King Manadeva and Amshuverma—reveal that governance was both hierarchical and religiously legitimized (Slusser, 1982). Kings were not only political rulers but also custodians of dharma, combining temporal power with moral responsibility. Administrative units were divided into grama (village), vishaya (district), and bhukti (province), with appointed officials maintaining law, order, and revenue collection (Singh, 2000).

Religious institutions played a central role in governance. Temples and monasteries were endowed with land and often administered local resources, suggesting a form of theocratic governance that intertwined state and religion. This arrangement was further strengthened during the Malla period (12th to 18th century), where city-states like Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were ruled by kings who promoted art, architecture, and dharmic law. The Malla rulers developed advanced civic codes and judicial practices, including written legal manuscripts like the Manav Nyaya Shastra, one of the earliest legal texts in Nepal (Malla, 2011).

Participatory elements were not entirely absent. Village-level decision-making bodies such as the panchalikas or guthi organizations handled local disputes, social services, and religious functions, reflecting early democratic elements in Nepalese society (Dhani, 1990). These traditional forms of community governance, deeply embedded in kinship and ritual networks, acted as intermediaries between the populace and the ruling elite.

Despite the eventual centralization of authority under later dynasties, the governance practices of ancient Nepal left a lasting legacy. Elements such as decentralized village management, sacred kingship, and legal pluralism still echo in contemporary Nepalese governance and customary law. This paper, therefore, seeks to offer a historical perspective on the governance and practice systems of ancient Nepal, focusing on their evolution, structure, and sociocultural impact. It aims to contribute to the broader discourse on pre-modern state formation in South Asia by highlighting Nepal's unique blend of political pragmatism, religious ideology, and community-based governance.

Research Question

How did governance and administrative systems evolve in ancient Nepal from the Kirat period to the Malla era, and what roles did cultural, religious, and indigenous practices play in shaping these systems?

Research Objective

To examine the historical development of governance structures in ancient Nepal, from the Kirat through the Malla periods, with a focus on administrative innovations, the interplay of religion and politics, and the integration of indigenous practices; and to identify gaps in existing scholarship by employing a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective.

Literature Review

The governance systems of ancient Nepal have been the subject of growing academic interest, particularly in the context of indigenous administrative structures and the interplay between politics, culture, and religion. This literature review synthesizes key scholarly

contributions related to the historical evolution of governance in Nepal from the Kirat period through the Malla era.

Scholars such as Regmi (1965) and Singh (1997) have highlighted the clan-based governance structure of the Kirat period, where kingship was hereditary but community-based councils played an influential role. The Kirats are credited with initiating early systems of land management and justice, though much of the evidence is drawn from oral traditions and limited inscriptions.

The Lichhavi period (ca. 4th–9th century CE) marked a significant transformation in state formation. According to D.R. Regmi (1983) and Slusser (1982), this period introduced codified laws (Lichhavi Smritis), revenue systems, and organized bureaucracy. Stone and copperplate inscriptions from this era provide detailed accounts of land grants, taxation, and local governance.

Historians also note the fusion of Hindu principles with statecraft, emphasizing dharma (moral duty) as a guiding principle for governance. The inscriptions of King Amshuverma serve as primary evidence of political sophistication during this time.

The Malla period (12th–18th century) is extensively covered in the works of Shaha (1990) and Lévi (1905), who explore the rise of urban centers and temple-states. The governance system became more fragmented yet elaborate, with independent kingdoms in Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. Each kingdom had its own set of administrative councils, judicial codes, and revenue mechanisms. Religious institutions held considerable sway, often functioning as both spiritual and political bodies.

Gaps and Opportunities in the Literature

While existing literature provides valuable insights, there is a noticeable gap in comparative analysis across different eras. Most studies focus on singular periods without linking them to broader regional or South Asian governance patterns. Furthermore, indigenous and oral traditions have often been overlooked in favor of written records. Recent interdisciplinary approaches, such as ethnohistory and political anthropology, offer promising pathways for a more nuanced understanding.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design to explore the governance and practice systems of ancient Nepal. The primary aim is to examine how political, administrative, and social structures functioned in ancient times, with particular emphasis on indigenous systems and cultural practices.

Data Collection

Data were collected through the analysis of primary and secondary historical sources. Primary sources include inscriptions, manuscripts, chronicles (e.g., Gopalraj Vamsavali), and archaeological findings. Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and prior research focused on ancient Nepalese governance systems. Archival research was conducted in libraries and historical archives in Nepal.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using documentary analysis and thematic interpretation. Patterns related to political hierarchy, law enforcement, taxation, and administrative mechanisms were identified and categorized. Thematic coding was used to

trace the evolution of governance models across different dynastic periods, such as the Kirat, Lichhavi, and Malla periods.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility and reliability, multiple sources were cross-referenced. Scholarly consensus and archaeological evidence were used to validate interpretations. An interdisciplinary approach, incorporating history, anthropology, and political science, was applied to broaden the analytical framework.

Analysis

Kirat Dynasty: The Early Foundations of Governance

The Kirat Dynasty, believed to have ruled Nepal from around the 8th century BCE to the 1st century CE, is considered one of the earliest known dynasties of Nepal. The Kirats were of Tibeto-Burman origin and are credited with establishing the early foundations of governance in the Kathmandu Valley.

Political Structure and Governance

The governance structure of the Kirat period was primarily tribal, with a semi-nomadic way of life that influenced the decentralization of power. Kirat rulers, known as *Yalambar*, were perceived as the heads of both the state and the military, holding significant authority over internal and external affairs. However, their power was not absolute, as they often ruled in conjunction with local tribal chiefs, who represented various clans and ethnic groups within the kingdom.

The political structure under the Kirats reflected a confederation of tribal states, where power was shared between the central authority (the king) and the local chiefs. This system allowed for a degree of local autonomy, with each region or village exercising its own traditional governance mechanisms. This form of decentralized rule was necessary to manage the geographically diverse terrain of Nepal and its fragmented population.

Legal and Social Systems

The Kirats followed an unwritten set of customary laws that were deeply rooted in their tribal traditions. These laws were primarily enforced through communal decisions made by local assemblies and elders, who held authority in resolving disputes, punishing offenders, and maintaining social harmony. Crime and punishment under the Kirat rule were based on restorative justice principles, focusing on compensation and reconciliation rather than retribution.

While no formal written legal codes exist from this period, the Kirat rulers are said to have adhered to a code of conduct that upheld moral obligations such as loyalty to the tribe, respect for elders, and shared responsibility for communal resources. The king, as the ultimate judge, would intervene in significant disputes or issues that affected the broader tribe.

Economic Practices and Trade

The economy during the Kirat period was largely agrarian, with most of the population engaged in subsistence farming. However, archaeological evidence suggests that the Kirats also participated in regional trade, particularly with India and Tibet. They controlled key trade routes that passed through the Himalayas, and this position enabled them to collect taxes and levies from merchants passing through their territory. Livestock and

agriculture formed the backbone of the economy, with a barter system prevalent in rural areas.

The introduction of metal tools and weapons during the Kirat period also indicates the existence of skilled artisans and metallurgists. The Kirats likely traded agricultural produce, animal products, and handcrafted goods with neighboring regions, contributing to the prosperity of the kingdom.

Religious Influence on Governance

Religious practices during the Kirat period were closely tied to nature worship and animistic beliefs. The Kirats believed in the presence of spirits in natural elements such as rivers, mountains, and forests, and they performed rituals to appease these deities. The governance system, too, was influenced by these beliefs, as rulers were seen as intermediaries between the people and the divine.

Unlike the later periods when Hinduism and Buddhism became dominant, the Kirats practiced a form of shamanistic religion, which blended animism with the worship of their ancestors and nature gods. This deeply spiritual connection with nature played an essential role in shaping the governance practices of the time, as leaders were expected to maintain harmony with both the natural world and their people.

Lichhavi Dynasty: The Emergence of a Centralized Monarchy

The Lichhavi Dynasty, which rose to power around the 4th century CE, marks a significant turning point in the history of governance in Nepal. The Lichhavis, who migrated from the northern Indian region of Vaishali, introduced a more centralized system of governance that laid the groundwork for subsequent dynasties. This period saw the codification of laws, the establishment of formal administrative structures, and the promotion of trade and commerce.

Political Centralization and Bureaucracy

Under the Lichhavis, Nepal saw the development of a more centralized monarchy, with power concentrated in the hands of the king. The king, known as *Raja*, held supreme authority over the kingdom, but he was assisted by a council of ministers, known as the *Sabhā*. This advisory council, composed of nobles and priests, played an essential role in decision-making, particularly in matters of state policy, religion, and law enforcement.

The Lichhavis are credited with creating an early form of bureaucracy, where officials were appointed to oversee various administrative functions such as tax collection, law enforcement, and public works. These officials were often drawn from the royal family or the noble class, and their responsibilities were clearly delineated through royal decrees.

Legal and Judicial Reforms

One of the most remarkable achievements of the Lichhavi period was the formal codification of laws. The *Manav Nyaya Shastra*, a legal treatise from this time, outlines the principles of governance, including rules for property rights, criminal justice, and commercial transactions. This legal code was heavily influenced by the Hindu *Dharmaśāstras*, which provided guidelines for ethical behavior and social order.

Justice during the Lichhavi period was administered through royal courts, with the king serving as the highest judge. Local disputes, however, were often resolved through community assemblies, which upheld traditional laws and customs. Punishments ranged from

finances and public humiliation to more severe penalties such as exile or execution, depending on the severity of the crime.

Economic Policies and Taxation

The Lichhavis introduced an efficient taxation system, which became a cornerstone of their governance. Taxes were levied on land, agricultural produce, and trade, providing the kingdom with the necessary resources to fund public works, including the construction of temples, roads, and irrigation systems. Trade flourished under Lichhavi rule, and Nepal's position as a hub for trans-Himalayan trade enhanced its economic standing.

The revenue generated from taxation was not only used for infrastructure but also for the promotion of religious activities and public festivals, which reinforced the king's divine status. Lichhavi rulers actively supported both Hinduism and Buddhism, and their patronage of religious institutions helped cement their political power.

Religious Syncretism and Governance

The Lichhavi period witnessed a remarkable fusion of religious ideologies, with Hinduism and Buddhism coexisting harmoniously. This religious syncretism had a profound impact on governance, as rulers often portrayed themselves as protectors of both religions. The Lichhavis built numerous Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas, which not only served as religious centers but also as symbols of the state's authority and cultural identity.

Religious leaders played a crucial role in the governance of the kingdom, advising the king on matters of state and serving as intermediaries between the ruling elite and the common people. This period of religious harmony contributed to social stability, allowing the Lichhavi rulers to maintain a balanced and prosperous governance system.

Malla Dynasty: The Flourishing of Culture and Governance

The Malla Dynasty, which ruled Nepal from the 12th to the 18th centuries, represents one of the most culturally and politically vibrant periods in Nepal's history. The Mallas are credited with the urbanization of the Kathmandu Valley and the development of Nepal's distinctive architectural and artistic heritage. Governance under the Mallas was characterized by a feudal system, with local rulers exercising a high degree of autonomy, while the central monarchy maintained control over key areas of administration and law.

Feudalism and Local Governance

The Malla kings ruled over a decentralized feudal system, where power was divided among several regional rulers, known as *Samantas* or feudal lords. These local rulers were responsible for maintaining law and order, collecting taxes, and administering justice within their territories. In return, they pledged loyalty to the central king and contributed to the kingdom's defense and economic stability.

The division of the kingdom into smaller principalities allowed for greater local autonomy, but it also led to frequent conflicts and power struggles among the Malla rulers. Despite these internal tensions, the Mallas were able to maintain a semblance of unity through a network of alliances, marriages, and religious patronage. While regional feudal lords had significant authority, the Malla kings ensured that the central monarchy retained control over critical matters of state, including diplomacy, trade, and religious affairs.

Administrative Organization and Bureaucratic Expansion

Under the Malla Dynasty, the administration became more structured, with a clear hierarchy of officials overseeing various aspects of governance. The Mallas maintained a

well-organized bureaucracy to manage everything from revenue collection to law enforcement. The *Amatyas* (ministers) and *Kumars* (princes) were key figures in the administration, helping to implement the king's policies and ensure the smooth functioning of the state.

The bureaucracy was structured to manage several key functions, including:

Taxation and revenue collection: The Malla kings instituted a more systematic approach to taxation. Taxes were collected on agricultural produce, trade, and artisanal goods. Revenue from taxation was used to fund public works, religious activities, and the defense of the kingdom.

Military administration: The Mallas maintained a standing army, which was crucial for both internal security and defense against external threats, such as the frequent incursions by Tibetan and Indian forces. The **Senapati** (commander-in-chief) was a key official responsible for the kingdom's military operations.

Public works and infrastructure: The Malla kings invested heavily in urban development, constructing roads, bridges, water supply systems, and irrigation canals. These public works not only improved the quality of life for the population but also enhanced trade and communication between different regions of the kingdom.

The Mallas also introduced a form of civic governance in urban areas. The cities of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan were divided into wards, each governed by a **Guthi** (local council), which managed local affairs such as sanitation, law enforcement, and religious festivals. The Guthi system was a unique feature of the Malla administration, blending civic duty with religious responsibility, as many Guthis were tied to temple management and cultural activities.

Legal Systems and Justice

The Malla kings took significant steps to formalize legal systems in their kingdom. The *Muluki Ain*, an early legal code introduced during this period, governed both civil and criminal matters. It laid down rules regarding property ownership, inheritance, marriage, commerce, and taxation. This legal code reflected a blend of Hindu jurisprudence, customary law, and pragmatic governance practices.

The Malla kings established royal courts, where judges appointed by the king administered justice. These courts were responsible for adjudicating disputes, enforcing contracts, and punishing crimes. Local disputes were often resolved by community assemblies or village elders, who administered justice based on customary laws and traditions.

The legal system under the Mallas also emphasized moral and religious conduct. The king was regarded as the upholder of *dharma* (moral and religious law), and his role in dispensing justice was seen as a divine duty. As a result, many legal matters had a strong religious component, with punishments often including penances or religious rituals aimed at restoring harmony and balance in the community.

Urbanization, Architecture, and Cultural Development

The Malla period is often described as the golden age of urbanization and architecture in Nepal, particularly in the Kathmandu Valley. The Malla kings were great patrons of the arts and were responsible for the construction of some of Nepal's most iconic architectural masterpieces. The *Durbar Squares* in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan, with their stunning

palaces, temples, and courtyards, are testament to the Mallas' contributions to urban development.

The Mallas' urban planning was sophisticated, with well-laid-out cities featuring markets, public squares, temples, monasteries, and water management systems such as stone spouts and ponds. These urban centers became hubs of political, economic, and religious life. The focus on public spaces reflects the importance of civic engagement and the social role of governance during this period.

Culturally, the Malla period saw a flourishing of art, music, dance, and literature. The kings themselves were often accomplished artists and poets, and they encouraged the development of Nepali art forms. The *Newari* culture, which is still dominant in the Kathmandu Valley, emerged and flourished during this time, blending Hindu and Buddhist traditions into a vibrant cultural tapestry. The Malla kings' patronage of both Hinduism and Buddhism fostered religious harmony and artistic innovation.

Religious festivals, such as *Indra Jatra* and *Dashain*, played a central role in the social and cultural life of the kingdom. These festivals were not only religious events but also occasions for the display of royal power and generosity, with the king presiding over public celebrations and distributing wealth and honors to the populace.

Religious Patronage and Statecraft

Religion played a central role in Malla governance, with kings often portraying themselves as divine rulers. The Mallas were devout Hindus, but they also supported the growth of Buddhism, leading to a period of religious harmony and cultural flourishing. The Malla kings were known for their patronage of temples, monasteries, and religious festivals, which helped reinforce their political authority.

The religious festivals sponsored by the Mallas, such as the *Indra Jatra* and the religious festivals sponsored by the Mallas, such as the *Indra Jatra* and *Machindranath Jatra*, played a crucial role in uniting the population and reinforcing the ruler's divine status. These festivals were not merely religious events but also served as political tools that showcased the power and benevolence of the ruling class. The Malla kings, particularly *Jayasthiti Malla*, are remembered for codifying religious and social rituals into laws, thereby intertwining religion and governance. By positioning themselves as the guardians of religion, the Mallas gained legitimacy, and their rule became sacrosanct. During this period, the concept of *Raj Dharma*—the ruler's duty to uphold moral and religious law—became central to governance. The kings were seen as both temporal and spiritual leaders, responsible for ensuring the prosperity of the kingdom through adherence to religious laws and traditions. This duality of governance helped the Mallas maintain power, even in a decentralized feudal system.

The Role of Trade and Economic Policy in Governance

The governance systems of ancient Nepal were intricately tied to the kingdom's economic health. Trade played a crucial role in the development of political and economic systems, particularly during the *Lichhavi* and *Malla* periods. Nepal's strategic position as a hub for trade between India, Tibet, and China made it a vital center for the exchange of goods, culture, and ideas.

Trade as a Pillar of Governance

Nepal's governance systems in ancient times relied heavily on taxation from trade routes. Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu, lay on key trade routes connecting India and Tibet,

which allowed for the flow of goods such as salt, wool, gold, and spices. The rulers of ancient Nepal, particularly the Mallas, recognized the importance of controlling trade routes for economic prosperity and political stability.

Nepal became a mediator between two of the world's largest ancient empires, benefiting from cross-cultural interactions. The rulers established a system of tolls and duties, which were collected at various points along trade routes. These taxes provided significant revenue that was reinvested in the construction of infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and storage facilities. The wealth generated from trade allowed the rulers to maintain a strong military presence, further ensuring the protection of trade routes.

Trade Networks

Nepal's position as a crossroads for trade allowed the Malla kings to develop strong commercial links with neighboring regions. Trade routes connected the Kathmandu Valley to the major trading hubs of northern India, Tibet, and China. Goods such as Himalayan salt, gold, silver, copper, and Tibetan wool were exchanged for Indian textiles, spices, and Chinese silks.

The Mallas imposed taxes on both local and foreign merchants, generating significant revenue for the state. These taxes were used to fund public works, military campaigns, and the construction of religious monuments. In addition to land-based trade, the Mallas also encouraged the production of high-quality artisanal goods, such as metalwork, pottery, and wood carvings, which were in high demand in regional markets.

Local Trade and Economic Practices

While international trade played a significant role, local trade and markets were equally important for economic governance. The Mallas, for instance, established numerous *Haats* (local markets) where agricultural products, crafts, and other goods were sold. These markets were regulated by the state to ensure fair pricing and quality control, which were essential for maintaining social harmony and economic stability.

The governance systems also encouraged artisanal production, particularly in the Kathmandu Valley, which became famous for its skilled artisans in metalwork, wood carving, and stonework. The state provided patronage to these artisans, recognizing the cultural and economic value of their work, particularly in temple construction and religious iconography.

Economic Integration with Religion

Religious institutions were deeply integrated into the economic practices of ancient Nepal. Temples and monasteries not only served religious purposes but also acted as centers of wealth accumulation and distribution. The Lichhavis and Mallas endowed religious institutions with land and wealth, creating an economic system where religious institutions played a major role in governance. Land grants to temples became an important tool of economic governance, as temples were responsible for managing agricultural lands, collecting taxes, and providing services to the community.

Land Revenue Systems

A key component of economic governance in ancient Nepal was the taxation of land. The Mallas, in particular, developed an elaborate system of land tenure, with taxes being collected based on landholdings. The revenue collected from land taxes was vital for funding military campaigns, building public infrastructure, and supporting religious institutions.

Taxation records from the Malla period indicate that land revenue was divided into different categories based on the fertility of the soil and the nature of the produce, which allowed for a more equitable taxation system.

During the Lichhavi period, the *Guthi* system was introduced, wherein land was donated for religious and charitable purposes, and the revenue generated from this land was used to maintain temples, monasteries, and other religious institutions. This system integrated governance, religion, and economic stability, creating a framework that ensured the sustainability of both religious and state institutions.

Governance Practices and Their Lasting Impact

The governance systems and practices of ancient Nepal have had a lasting impact on the country's political and social development. Many elements of the legal codes, administrative practices, and religious institutions established during the Kirat, Lichhavi, and Malla periods continued to influence governance structures in Nepal well into the modern era.

The emphasis on religious legitimacy, local autonomy through feudal structures, and the integration of Hindu and Buddhist principles into governance are all key legacies of ancient Nepalese political systems. These practices not only shaped the internal dynamics of the country but also influenced its interactions with neighboring regions, contributing to Nepal's unique place in South Asian history.

The Legacy of Ancient Governance in Nepal

The governance systems and practices established during the Kirat, Lichhavi, and Malla periods have left an indelible mark on Nepal's political and social structures. Many of the administrative, legal, and religious institutions developed during these periods continued to influence governance in Nepal well into the modern era.

Continuation of Feudal Structures

The feudal governance model, which became entrenched during the Malla period, persisted in Nepal until the mid-20th century. Local lords and regional rulers continued to wield significant power in the countryside, even as the central monarchy remained the dominant force in Kathmandu. This feudal structure contributed to a highly stratified society, with the ruling elite controlling land, resources, and political power, while the majority of the population remained engaged in subsistence farming.

Influence on Religious and Legal Institutions

The blending of Hindu and Buddhist traditions that characterized the governance of ancient Nepal continues to shape the country's religious and cultural landscape today. Temples, monasteries, and religious festivals remain central to social life in Nepal, and the king's traditional role as the protector of religious institutions has been echoed in the role of political leaders in modern times.

The legal codes developed during the Lichhavi and Malla periods, particularly the emphasis on moral and religious law, influenced the development of the *Muluki Ain* (the General Code of Nepal), which was codified in the 19th century and served as the foundation of Nepal's legal system until recent reforms.

Legacy in Art, Architecture, and Urban Planning

The artistic and architectural achievements of the Malla Dynasty continue to define Nepal's cultural identity. The Durbar Squares of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan, along

with numerous temples and palaces, remain UNESCO World Heritage Sites and are major attractions for both tourists and scholars. The Mallas' focus on urban development, public spaces, and religious patronage has left a lasting legacy on the physical and cultural landscape of Nepal.

Evolution of Legal Systems

The legal systems of ancient Nepal were shaped by the need to regulate complex social, economic, and political relationships. Early Kirat governance, as discussed, relied on customary laws and oral traditions for dispute resolution. These systems were decentralized and varied between tribes, reflecting the cultural diversity of the region. However, with the establishment of the Lichhavi Dynasty, there was a significant shift towards codification of laws, particularly with the introduction of the *Manav Nyaya Shastra*.

Under the Malla rulers, legal systems became more sophisticated. The *Muluki Ain* provided comprehensive legal guidelines for civil, criminal, and commercial matters. It is important to note that many of these laws were influenced by Hindu scriptures, particularly the *Dharmashastra*. For instance, laws governing inheritance, marriage, and caste were derived from religious principles, which reinforced the hierarchical social structure of ancient Nepal.

Caste System and Social Stratification

The governance systems in ancient Nepal were heavily influenced by the caste system, particularly during the Lichhavi and Malla periods. While early Kirat society may have been more egalitarian, the introduction of Hinduism and its associated social hierarchies during the Lichhavi period created a more stratified society. The caste system, which classified individuals based on their birth and occupation, became entrenched in both social and legal practices.

The *Varna* system, which classified society into four main groups—Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (servants)—was reflected in the governance of ancient Nepal. The kings often came from the Kshatriya class, while Brahmins played a crucial role as advisors, judges, and religious leaders. This hierarchy was further reinforced through legal systems, which provided different rights and privileges to different castes. For instance, inheritance laws favored higher castes, and the administration of justice was often biased in favor of the ruling elites.

Despite this stratification, the Malla period saw some degree of social mobility, particularly in urban centers like Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan, where the rise of merchant classes and artisans played an increasingly important role in the economy. Governance systems adapted to these changing social dynamics, allowing for some flexibility within the rigid caste structure.

Diplomacy, Warfare, and External Relations

The governance systems of ancient Nepal were not only concerned with internal administration but also with maintaining relationships with neighboring kingdoms and empires. The geopolitical location of Nepal, nestled between India and Tibet, meant that diplomacy and warfare were crucial aspects of governance.

Diplomatic Relations with Neighboring States

Throughout its history, Nepal maintained diplomatic relations with both India and Tibet, often acting as a mediator between these two powers. The Lichhavis, for example,

maintained cordial relations with the Gupta Empire in India, while the Mallas established trade and diplomatic ties with the Tibetan kingdom. Diplomatic missions were often accompanied by gifts, and marriage alliances were used to strengthen political ties.

Nepal's rulers were skilled diplomats who understood the importance of balancing relationships with powerful neighbors. The *Silk Road* trade routes that passed through Nepal required careful diplomatic negotiations to ensure the safe passage of goods and travelers. In return, Nepal enjoyed a degree of political autonomy, even as larger empires exerted influence over the region.

Military Organization and Warfare

The governance of ancient Nepal included a well-organized military structure, particularly during the Lichhavi and Malla periods. The kings maintained standing armies, which were used to protect the kingdom from external threats and to maintain internal order. The Mallas, in particular, are known for their military campaigns to expand their territory within the Kathmandu Valley.

Military governance during this period included the development of fortifications, strategic outposts, and training centers for soldiers. The military was also involved in maintaining control over trade routes, which were vital for the kingdom's economic prosperity. In times of conflict, the military could mobilize quickly to defend against invasions from neighboring states or to suppress internal revolts.

Conclusion

The governance systems of ancient Nepal were shaped by a unique blend of tribal traditions, religious beliefs, and external influences. From the early Kirat period's tribal confederacy to the centralized monarchies of the Lichhavi and Malla dynasties, Nepal developed a governance framework that balanced local autonomy with central authority. The integration of religion into governance, the codification of laws, the development of economic policies based on trade and taxation, and the use of diplomacy and military power were all defining features of Nepal's ancient political systems. These systems not only maintained social order and economic prosperity but also fostered a rich cultural heritage that continues to influence Nepal's identity today.

The legacy of ancient Nepal's governance practices can still be seen in the modern nation-state, particularly in its legal traditions, cultural institutions, and social structures. As Nepal navigates the challenges of modern governance, it draws upon its deep historical roots, making the study of its ancient systems crucial for understanding its contemporary political and social landscape.

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