

## **Class, Gender, and Patriarchy: The Status of Women in Ancient Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the status of women in ancient Nepal during the Kirata and Lichhavi periods examining how the socio-economic framework, political systems, and cultural norms intersected to perpetuate gender inequalities. By analyzing published archives, including Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist religious texts, Vamshavalis, and Licchhavi inscriptions, the study reveals how patriarchal control was maintained and legitimized through laws and social practices. Except for the Khasa women kingdom of western Nepal, where there was matrimonial society, the broader societal framework systematically excluded women from political participation and economic autonomy. The caste system and early marriage customs further reinforced women's subordination. This paper argues that the intersection of class and gender dynamics, driven by economic interests, played a crucial role in maintaining male dominance, unraveling the historical foundations of gender inequality in ancient Nepal. This study offers some valuable insights into the persistent system of gender oppression, informing contemporary discussions on women's rights and social justice in Nepal that would encourage the future scholars to look into the issue from different perspectives for a holistic understanding of the condition of Ancient Nepali women.

*Keywords:* patriarchy, Kirata, Lichhavi, Khasa, class

### **Introduction**

The status of women in ancient Nepal presents a complex tapestry woven with threads of reverence, subordination, and socio-economic control. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted roles and experiences of women during the Kirata and Lichhavi periods, drawing on primary sources such as religious texts, Vamshavalis (genealogical records), and

Licchavi inscriptions. Men's domination over women in ancient Nepal was not a simple consequence of biological differences but a result of complex socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. By controlling property, labor, and political power, men were able to maintain and reinforce a system of gender inequality that benefited the ruling classes. Religious and cultural justifications further legitimized this control, embedding patriarchal values deeply within the social fabric. Understanding these dynamics reveals how gender oppression was intricately linked with broader systems of economic exploitation and class domination.

The status of women in ancient Nepal has been a subject of various scholarly works, each highlighting different aspects of their lives during the Kirata and Licchavi periods. Here we synthesize the perspectives of several historians to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's roles, rights, and societal positions, and identify the critical gaps in the works of these scholars. According to D. R. Regmi, women in ancient Nepal had the right to divorce, and property rights were governed by Dharmasastra law. Regmi notes that, apart from a few instances such as divorce rights, the societal norms were similar to those of the Indian plains (Regmi, 2007, pp. 272–274). Tulsi Narayan Shrestha concurs, emphasizing that during the Kirata period, women could divorce and remarry, reflecting a relatively progressive stance on marital rights for that time (Shrestha, 1989, pp. 20, 31). During the Licchavi period, remarriage was permitted for widows, although women who neglected their husbands by taking lovers were deprived of their inheritance rights (Shrestha, 1989, p. 62). Diwakar Acharya adds that the Licchavi rulers, influenced by the dharmasastras, allowed childless widows or women whose husbands were lost to remarry. The administration disciplined women driven by passion through fines but did not penalize those who bore children, regardless of how many times they remarried (Acharya, 2014, pp. 272, 282).

Tulsi Ram Vaidya, Tri Ratna Manandhar, and Shankar Lal Joshi argue that women held a subordinate position in ancient Nepal. Polygamy, early marriage, and widowhood were common, especially among the elite. While widow remarriage did occur, it was prevalent only among the common people, who had the flexibility to leave their husbands and remarry (Vaidya et al., 1993, pp. 95–111). Joshi notes that during the Lichhavi period, women had an inferior social position but were given high ritual status in religious ceremonies that required the presence of a wife (Joshi, 1993, p. 123). The idea of Sati existed among the ruling elites, but many royal widows did not perform Sati; instead, they contributed to religious and public works such as constructing water conduits and digging wells (Joshi, 1993, pp. 124–125).

Arpita Tripathy highlights that women from well-to-do families could receive education, as evidenced by inscriptions referring to Manadeva I's daughter as proficient in all arts (Tripathy, 2022, p. 5). Women also set up religious trusts and images in tribute to deceased relatives, appearing in inscriptions not only as wives of donors but also as donors themselves. Notable examples include Kṣemasundari and Guṇavati, queens of Manadeva I, who established Shiva lingas, and Śaiva images (Tripathy, 2022, pp. 5–6). The Adi-Narayana Thankot Inscription indicates that Jayasundari, the sister of king Vasantadeva, was granted tax free Jyapalika village, suggesting women's capacity to own and manage property (Tripathy, 2022, p. 6).

The Changu Narayan pillar inscription of Manadeva I from 464 AD mentions the practice of sati, but Tripathy interprets sati as a widow who remains completely faithful to her husband, not necessarily implying self-immolation (Tripathy, 2022, p. 9). The Anantalingesvara inscription and the Harigaon Inscription also refer to female servants and workers in temples, indicating women's involvement in religious institutions (Tripathy, 2022, pp. 8–9).

While existing literature provides a detailed account of women's rights and societal roles in ancient Nepal, it primarily focuses on the Kathmandu Valley and elite women, leaving significant gaps in understanding the status of women in other regions, such as the ganarajyas of the Tarai and the western Khasa women's kingdom. These gaps highlight the need for a deeper analysis of how class hierarchy and economic exploitation intersected with gender to shape women's lives across different regions. The current scholarship does not sufficiently address how economic dependencies and class hierarchies influenced women's rights and social positions, particularly among the masses. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative analysis between the status of women in oligarchic republics (ganarajyas) of Tarai, and matrimonial regions like the Khasa women's kingdom of Karnali, which could provide insights into the variability of gender roles and the potential for alternative social frameworks. Addressing these gaps could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the historical foundations of gender relations in ancient Nepal.

This study has the objectives to analyze the impact of socio-economic and political frameworks on women's status and roles during the Kirata and Lichhavi periods, and to understand how class interests and economic exploitation intersected with gender, thereby perpetuating gender inequality and controlling women's labor and property in ancient Nepal. It seeks to explore the following research questions: - How did the socio-economic and political system influence the status and roles of women in ancient Nepal? In what ways did religious texts like the Vasistha Dharmasutra and the Manu Smriti, along with the caste system, reinforce gender inequalities and legitimize the control over women's labor and property rights?

By examining these historical contexts, this research not only elucidates the persistent challenges faced by women but also highlights the socio-economic mechanisms that underpinned their subordination. In doing so, it provides a nuanced understanding of the

historical foundations of gender inequality in Nepal, offering critical insights that resonate with contemporary discussions on women's rights and social justice.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a textual analytical approach to study the status of women in ancient Nepal during the Kirata and Lichhavi periods, drawing from historical, textual, and socio-economic perspectives. Primary sources, including religious texts such as Rig Veda, Pali Buddhist texts, Kirata Mundhum, Vamshavalis (genealogical records), and published Lichhavi inscriptions, are scrutinized to understand the prescribed roles and rights of women. Key texts like the Vasistha Dharmasutra and the Manu Smriti are analyzed to reveal how they reinforced patriarchal and class-based systems through inheritance laws, marriage customs, and social norms. Additionally, genealogical records and inscriptions are examined to trace historical mentions of notable women and legal decrees. This analysis is contextualized within the socio-political landscape of the Ancient Nepal, exploring the impact of political systems, such as the oligarchic republics (ganarajyas), Kirata, and Licchhavi monarchy, and the property rights, labor practices, and the caste system.

By examining power dynamics between different classes and genders, the research reveals mechanisms through which ruling classes maintained control over women and economic resources. Synthesizing the results thematically, the study offers a nuanced interpretation of the socio-economic underpinnings of gender inequality, contributing to a holistic understanding of the status of women in ancient Nepal.

### **The Pre-Lichhavi Period**

The pre-Lichhavi period of ancient Nepal until the first century AD, is a rich tapestry of diverse socio-political frameworks that significantly influenced the status and roles of women. During this time, the country was a mosaic of various kingdoms and republics, each with its own governance models, cultural practices, and societal norms. This period saw the

coexistence of monarchies and oligarchic republics, which together shaped the complex political landscape of ancient Nepal. By examining the socio-political frameworks of this era, we can gain a deeper understanding of the status of women and the factors that influenced their lives.

### **The Kirata Kingdom**

The Kirata kingdom, as described in the Kirata Mundhum, extended from the River Tista in the east to Kinner Kirat (Garhwal) in the west, and from the snowlines in the north to the Ganga River in the south (Chemjong, 2003a, pp. 5–7, 104, 108–114). In Mundhum, this vast territory, known as Nepal, was centered in the Kathmandu Valley, referred to as Senjelungma (Chemjong, 2003a, p. 89). Despite its significance, the Kirata state had politically weakened by the sixth century giving space to oligarchic republics of Tarai, the Khasa women kingdom, and the Chedi kingdom of western Nepal. According to the Mundhum, the Abhiras of the Yadu or Yadava tribe ruled central Nepal for eight generations. Their territory extended from the River Trisuli in the west to the River Tamba Koshi in the east, and from Chitlang in the south to the snow line of the mountain ranges in the north. The capital of this kingdom was located at Tistung (Chemjong, 2003b, pp. 5–6).

The Abhiras, like many ruling elites, maintained their power through control over agricultural production, trade routes, and resource distribution. This economic control created a class hierarchy, with the ruling class benefiting from the labor and surplus produced by the subjugated classes. The Kirata king Yalamba of Yalung in eastern hills attacked the Abhiras, and killed their king Bhuvan Singh (Chemjong, 2003b, p. 6). Yalamba's victory and the subsequent establishment of the Kirata dynasty in Nepal can be seen as a revolutionary change aimed at redistributing power and resources. This transition did not merely signify a change of rulers but indicated a fundamental restructuring of the socio-economic order. On the basis of Gopala Rajvamshavali of the fourteenth century AD, we can say that the Kirata

rule was established in 1700 BC (Niraula & Chetri, 2080, p. 41). Yalamba extended the political boundary of Nepal in the east to Teesta River, and made Thankot his capital (Chemjong, 2003b, p. 6). The Kirata Mundhum says that goddess Yumasamang took the form of Queen Suyen Suno Hangma who created the country of Nepal by uniting Sinyuk-hills and Muden- Tarai, and fixed the political boundary to Ganga River in the south, and further extended the territory to Kinner Kirat or Garhwal in the east (Chemjong, 2003b, pp. 111–112).

The Kirata state had a distinct cultural identity, and was known for granting women certain rights, such as divorce and remarriage, which indicated a degree of autonomy for women (Shrestha, 1989). The Kirata rulers introduced the system called Kipat where land was the public property, and for utilizing the land, every household paid one tenth of the produce or income to the state as tax (Chemjong, 2003b, p. 56). This system not only facilitated equitable access to resources but also minimized the economic disparities that typically underpinned class-based exploitation. The people in every village or city had the assembly called Chumlung where the elders including women met and took decisions. Such decisions were valuable than beliefs and superstitions of the people (Chemjong, 2003b, pp. 35–42). By involving women in these assemblies, the Kirata society ensured that women's voices and perspectives were integral to community governance.

The Kiratas had the tradition of paying bride price to the woman's parents, and marriage tax to the village headman (Chemjong, 2003b, pp. 57–58). These were the mechanisms that both acknowledged and compensated women's contributions to the social and economic fabric of the community. These practices also reflect an economic transaction that underscores the value of women within the society. Both the husband and wife had the right to divorce, and the woman could remarry after her divorce (Chemjong, 2003b, pp. 58–59). This level of gender equality in marital relations is indicative of a socio-political

environment that valued individual rights and minimized patriarchal control. The children after the divorce could remain with the father or with the maternal uncle (Chemjong, 2003b, pp. 58–59). This flexibility in family roles and responsibilities reflects a society that valued practical solutions over traditional gender norms.

### **The Ganarajyas and Their Influence**

Despite its significance as being the legitimate head of Nepal, the Kirata state had weakened by the sixth century BC giving prominence to regional powers. During the time of Gautama Buddha (566–486 BC), four ganarajyas (oligarchic republics) operated within the Vajji Sangha, a confederation of eight clans. These included the Sakya of Kapilvastu, the Koliya of Ramagrama, the Malla of Pava and Kusinara, and the Videha of Mithila. Prominent members of the Vajji Sangha were the Licchavis of Vaishali, the Moriya of Pipalivana, the Bulli of Allakapa, and the Vagga of Sumsumagiri in the Indian plains (Jayaswal, 1943, pp. 44–45).

Among these ganarajyas, the Malla ganarajya was the largest located at the junction of eastern Rapti with Gandak (Raychaudhari, 1927, p. 79) that included Chitwan extending to Gorkhpur and Champaran in the east. The Rohini River divided the Sakya of Kapilvastu from that of the Koliya of Ramagrama (Parasi) and Devdaha (Rupandehi). Janakpur, the capital of Videha was prosperous and center of Vedic education. However, in the sixth century BC, Videha was weakened by an attack from Kasi, prompting it to join the Vajji Sangha to protect itself from other southern powers like the Kosala kingdom (Raychaudhari, 1927, p. 84). These republics were characterized by collective decision-making and political inclusivity among the male elite, but women were largely excluded from political roles and assemblies (sabha). This exclusion underscores the gendered nature of political authority and control, reinforcing the patriarchal framework of the Tarai plains (Niraula & Chetri, 2080, p. 99).



The strategic positioning of the ganarajyas allowed them to control vital trade routes connecting the southern plains with the northern hills. This control over trade routes not only enhanced economic power but also influenced social hierarchy and gender relations. The economic activities in these regions were crucial for both men and women. Women's participation in economic roles, although often undervalued, was essential for the livelihoods of their families. The economic dependencies created by trade and agriculture reinforced patriarchal norms and limited women's autonomy and property rights. In the local level, there were assemblies of the people called samiti of peasants and artisans, and sreni of merchants and traders where elders including women met and took decisions. Similarly, the Brahmins and Buddhist monks had their own assemblies called parishad and sangh respectively (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 142–145). However, these assemblies were divided on caste lines, reinforcing social stratification (Davids, 1911, p. 49).

The male dominated society of ganarajyas were characterized by the existence of private property, where only sons could inherit property, while daughters could take the dowry brought by mother during her marriage, in accordance with the law of Vasistha dharmasutra (Niraula & Chetri, 2080, p. 51). Daughters were married off before their age of menstruation, and polygamy existed in society (Niraula & Chetri, 2080, pp. 152–153). Thus, we can see the organization of assemblies and the inheritance laws reflect the intersection of class, caste, and gender dynamics that shaped the lives of women in these societies. The inclusion of women in the assemblies at local level was a progressive step, yet their influence was likely constrained by the overarching patriarchal and caste hierarchies. Early marriages ensured that daughters remained under the control of their fathers and husbands, limiting their autonomy and potential for economic independence. The Tarai society was marked for patriarchal control and economic dependency of women.

In addition to the ganarajyas, the Chedi kingdom in western Nepal, centered in the Mahakali region and extending to Kartrapur or Garhwal, played a significant role in the region's political landscape (Nautiyal, 1969, pp. 20–30). The Khasa state, based on oral narratives, also existed during this period in the Humla-upper Karnali region (Pradhan, 1991, p. 33). These political formations contributed to the diverse political milieu of ancient Nepal.

### **The Khasa women's kingdom**

The Khasa women's kingdom in Humla, as described in various historical accounts, offers a unique opportunity to examine the status of women. This matrilineal society, characterized by female leadership and economic management, stands in stark contrast to the patriarchal frameworks common in other ancient civilizations. By analyzing the material conditions, class dynamics, and gender relations within the Khasa kingdom, we can gain insights into how women's roles were shaped by and contributed to the socio-economic fabric of their society.

The Kirata Mundhum mentions that the Khasas came from Tarim basin of western China during the Kirata rule in Nepal. Their fort called Khasgarh in Tarim basin was attacked by the tribe of Laghu Yuehchi Kushan, so when they came to the Himalayan region, the Kirata rulers allowed them to settle in the region- west of Trisuli River. Gradually they spread to the regions up to Kashmir (Chemjong, 2003, pp. 240–242). From Tibet, the Khasas came to Humla through the gap between Takh Himal and Changla Himal, and they established their first state (Pradhan, 1991, p. 33). All this shows that the Khasas came to Himalayan region from Xing Xiang in remote past through Tibet.

Ptolemy, who completed his work in 151 AD, also mentions the Cesi living in the Himalayan region (Atkinson, 1974, p. 279). He writes that the country of the Cesi was located in the trans-Himalayan tract viewing from the north-west of India (Adhikari, 1997, p. 28). Herodotus locates the Khasas as living in the north from other Indians who traded to

bring gold from northern areas (Nautiyal, 1969, p. 17). It seems that they had trade relations with Tibet from where they procured gold.

In the Karna parva of Mahabharata, the Khasas are called Vahika belonging to the Jarttika clan who lived in a town of Sakala near the river Apaga (Karna Parva, 2024). The Karna Parva informs us that Varna system among the Vahikas depended on profession, and that they had a tradition of making Brahmana from at least one family meaning a priest, shaman or an intellectual (Karna Parva, 2024).

The important Chinese account is the Eastern Nu annals of 586 AD of the Sui period about the Stree rajya or women's kingdom. The region was rich in copper, gold ore, cinnabar, musk, yaks, and two breeds of horses. They also exported salt to India. They were in conflict with Tanghsiang (Tibet) and Indian rulers. They used Indian script (devnagari) and Chinese calendar (Atkinson, 1974, pp. 458–459). On the basis of the products mentioned in the Chinese Eastern Nu Annals, Pandey opines that "the mineral wealth of Jumla and Parvat, the horses of Jumla and Mustang, and the salt of the Salt Range (Khari Pradesa) and of the lakes of northwestern part were the main commodities of exchange of western Nepal in the local marts till the beginning of the nineteenth century" (Pandey, 1997a, p. 99). This indicates that the Stree rajya extended from Karnali region to Parvat in the east.

The Karna parva mentions that among the Khasas property was inherited in matrilineal lineage, and they protected the Himalayan region. The Vahika women are described as beautiful with high cheekbones, with red tikas and kajal (black collyrium) on their eyes. They had wide hips and heavy thighs wearing clothes of wool and leather (Karna Parva, 2024). The Eastern Nu annals mentions that the Khasas were ruled by queen who had the title of Supi. The palace was nine storeys tall. There were women attendants and officers. The court was held in every five days. The males only become soldiers and farmers. The queen was called Pinchiu, and the female minister as Kaopali. They had matrilineal society

(Atkinson, 1974, pp. 458–459). There was a queen named Tang Pang in 618-626 AD, who paid tribute to China. In 742 AD, they elected a king, and after few years Lhasa (Tibet) conquered them (Atkinson, 1974, pp. 459). Here we can see that the name and titles of the rulers are given in Chinese, we do not know their Khasa names.

Yuan Chwang, the Chinese pilgrim of seventh century AD, tells us that the Karnali region was called the Suvarnabhumi (land of gold) also known as Stree rajya or dominion ruled by women, where a gold of superior quality could be found. The men attended only to the suppression of revolts and the cultivation of the fields (Watters, 2004, p. 330).

The abundance of resources and strategic trading opportunities enabled the accumulation of wealth in the Khasa kingdom, which in turn supported a social system where women could attain and exercise power. The matrilineal inheritance system ensured that property and wealth remained within the female lineage, reinforcing women's economic and social status. In the Khasa kingdom, Varna identity was determined by profession- an early Vedic tradition, a system that allowed for some fluidity and mobility within the social hierarchy. This Varna system likely contributed to a relatively egalitarian distribution of labor and resources, at least compared to more rigidly stratified societies of southern plains. Women, particularly those of the ruling class, occupied central roles in governance, economic management, and cultural life.

Women's control over political and economic spheres allowed for a stable and prosperous society that also ensured that the reproductive and socializing roles of women were aligned with their economic and political power, thus reinforcing their dominant position. The high cheekbones, red tikas, and kajal described in the Mahabharata's Karna Parva symbolize not only physical beauty but also cultural markers of identity and power. By examining this society, we can understand how women's status was not merely a product of

cultural beliefs but was deeply intertwined with the economic and material realities of their time.

### **The Lichhavi Period**

The Lichhavis ruled in Nepal from the first century AD to eight century. They had invaded Nepal from Vaishali in the Indian plains. The Mundhum mentions the Chang Chyu state of the Lichhavis in the Indo-Gangetic plains (Chemjong, 2003:17). The Lichhavis were powerful in Vaishali, but their chief city was conquered around the fifth century BC by the Magadhan ruler Ajatsatru (492 - 460 BC) (Mahajan, 1997: 246-247). According to the Kirata Mundhum, the Lichhavis captured Simmangarh (Simraungadh), subsequently bringing the eastern and western Tarai regions under their control. They then advanced to Gokarna in the Kathmandu valley. Their leader, Nemikh, exploited the weaknesses of the Kiratas and, seizing the opportunity, dethroned the Kirata king Gasti in Thankot (Chemjong, 2003: 15-18).

In May 1992, a sandstone statue was unearthed in Maligaon, Kathmandu district. The statue depicts a male in a standing posture with one hand on his waist. The pedestal inscription identifies him as Maharajasya Jaya Verma, dated 107 samvat, corresponding to 185 AD in the prevalent Saka era (Tamot and Alsop, 1996). This suggests that Nemikh established the Lichhavi dynasty by defeating the Kirata ruler Gasti. Jaya Verma, who may have been Nemikh's successor, possibly erected this statue as a symbol of Lichhavi power.

The Lichhavi period in Nepal marked a significant shift in socio-economic structures with the introduction of private property, transitioning from communal to individual ownership. This shift laid the foundation for a stratified society, exacerbating class distinctions. The Chinese traveler Huen Tsang in the seventh century AD noted that Nepal, surrounded by snow-clad mountains, had abundant food and fruits, and its people were skilled in art and architecture despite lacking formal education (Gautam, 2019, p. 61). Trade

thrived with the use of copper coins, and there were more merchants and traders than cultivators.

The Tang annals of the tenth century AD highlight the disparity in wealth through the types of ornaments used, with the rich using gold and silver while the poor used bamboo and bones (Nepal, 2017, p. 161-164). The market economy was vibrant with hat-bazars and specialized markets for imported goods. The agricultural sector relied on bulls for plowing, and houses were constructed from mud and stone, reflecting the labor-intensive work of the lower classes.

Despite their migration, the Lichhavis did not fundamentally alter Nepal's existing social institutions but introduced Vaishnavism and reinforced the caste system (Gautam, 2019, p. 56). Inscriptions from the period mention Brahmanas and Kshatriyas but conspicuously omit Vaishyas and Shudras. The Anantalingeswar inscription of the seventh century AD mentions Chandalas, who were executioners, tasked with punishing criminals (Vajracharya, 1996, p. 485-489). This indicates that while certain professional groups were recognized, the full development of caste-based stratification, especially for lower castes like Chandalas, was not yet fully established during the Lichhavi period. Judging from the inscriptions, the Lichhavi rulers modified the caste system of the Manu Smriti. The socio-economic changes and class stratification significantly disadvantaged women, reinforcing their subordination and economic dependency through a patriarchal and caste-based framework.

During the Kirata rule, both the males and females could use the land by paying taxes to the state. The Lichhavis did not change this system but the limited mention of women in inscriptions suggest that women were not considered independent legal entities. Their status and rights were defined through their relationships with male family members. Few women from ruling elite families could own private property as seen in the King Vasanta Deva

inscription of Thankot belonging to 506 AD, where his sister Jayasundari is shown to have received the village of Jayapalika as a tax free land (Regmi, 1983, pp. 19–23). Similarly, elite women also built temples such as the inscription of Amśuvarmā dated 615 AD mentions that his Bhogadevi constructed the temple of Surabhogesvara in the name of her husband Rajaputra Surasena (Regmi, 1983, pp. 82–83). Overall, women's roles were deeply embedded in maintaining cultural and religious traditions, reinforcing their subordination within the Lichhavi socio-economic framework.

The vibrant trade and market economy, while creating economic opportunities, did not necessarily empower women. Most merchants and traders were men, and women's participation in these economic activities would have been limited and mediated through male relatives. Religious text of Manusmriti (BUHLER, 1886) prescribed early marriage, roles and behaviors for women, further limiting their freedoms and reinforcing gender hierarchies. Manu says that "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Manu 3:79). "A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him, or a man of twenty-four a girl eight years of age ; if (the performance of) his duties would (otherwise) be impeded, (he must marry) sooner" (BUHLER, 1886, p. Manu 8: 94). The Maligaon Inscription of Vishnu Gupta dated 633 AD refers to widow remarriage, and women had the right to divorce their husbands. However, the women were punished by confiscation of their property if they failed to produce a child through the another husband (Regmi, 1983, pp. 105–106).

Despite the general lack of formal education noted by Huen Tsang, women, particularly from artisan families, may have been involved in skilled work. However, their contributions were undervalued and did not translate into social or economic power. Women were primarily confined to unpaid domestic labor, including child-rearing and household

management, which kept them economically dependent. The economic exploitation extended to women in lower classes, who might have been involved in labor-intensive agricultural or artisanal work under harsh conditions. Overall, while a few elite women enjoyed certain privileges, the majority of women in Lichhavi society experienced significant economic and social subordination. The combination of private property introduction, class distinctions, and patriarchal norms ensured that women's status remained largely secondary and dependent on male authority.

### **Results and Discussion**

The pre-Lichhavi period, despite the occasional elevation of women to revered statuses among the Kiratas, was marked by exclusionary political practices, restrictive inheritance laws, and early marriage customs that curtailed women's autonomy. The subsequent Lichhavi rule, underpinned by the patriarchal dictates of the dharmasastras mainly the Manu Smriti, further entrenched these inequities, reinforcing a societal framework that perpetuated gender and class hierarchies. Women were denied the right to inherit their father's property. Property and wealth were controlled by male lineage, ensuring that economic power remained within the hands of men. This control over property reinforced male dominance as economic resources were central to power and status. Women could only inherit the property brought by their mothers as dowries. This system ensured that women's economic value was tied to their marital status and controlled by male relatives.

Women were married off before menstruation, ensuring early control over their reproductive capabilities. This early marriage practice transferred women's reproductive labor to their husband's family, aligning with the economic interests of patriarchal families. Women's labor in domestic and agricultural work was essential yet undervalued. By controlling women's labor, men could exploit this labor for economic gains without granting women commensurate rights or recognition.



The religious text mainly the Manu Smriti codified gender roles and justified the subordination of women through religious and cultural norms. By embedding patriarchal values within religious doctrines, these texts provided a divine or moral justification for male dominance. The caste system, reinforced by religious and cultural norms, dictated social hierarchies that subordinated women. The rigid caste structure ensured that women's roles were strictly defined and controlled, limiting their social and economic mobility.

The reading of Kirata Mundhum reveals that although women had rights to divorce and chose their bridegroom for marriage, they could not inherit the property. While figures like Queen Suyen Suno Hangma were revered as goddesses, this reverence often did not translate into broader social and economic rights for ordinary women. The deification of certain women could also be used to reinforce the idea that exceptional women were divine exceptions rather than models for all women. The subsequent Lichhavi rule, underpinned by the patriarchal dictates of the Manu Smriti, further entrenched these inequities, reinforcing a societal framework that perpetuated gender and class hierarchies. Women were explicitly excluded from political assemblies (Sabhas) in the ganarajyas. This exclusion from decision-making processes ensured that political power remained concentrated in the hands of men, who could then legislate in favor of maintaining male dominance.

Political systems were designed to uphold and reinforce patriarchal control. By excluding women from political participation, these systems ensured that laws and policies would perpetuate gender inequalities. The practice of polygamy reinforced the notion of women as property and ensured that men could accumulate multiple wives, further consolidating their control over women's reproductive labor. By marrying off girls before menstruation, families ensured that control over women passed from father to husband at an early age, reducing the possibility of women developing independent economic or social

power. Social norms and laws restricted women's physical mobility and personal autonomy, ensuring they remained under the control of male guardians throughout their lives.

### **Conclusion**

The condition of women in Ancient Nepal was heavily influenced by the prevailing economic and social systems. The shift from communal to more stratified societies generally led to increased marginalization and subordination of women. While certain periods and exceptions, like the Khasa Women Kingdom, provided more significant roles and rights for women, the overarching trend was one of patriarchal control and economic exploitation, limiting women's autonomy and power in both public and private spheres.

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