

Synopsis

The questions of identity and belonging were never an issue while growing up, and the Indian identity was a given identity after being identified as Sikkimese. Sikkim is the 22nd state of India Vide 36th Amendment Act, 1975. The language majorly used by the people in Sikkim was Nepali though Bhutia, Limboo, Sherpa and Lepcha were spoken as well as taught it was mostly limited to its usage by people belonging to that community in certain pockets of their settlement. Nepali was the lingua franca and subconsciously it was assumed as everyone's language. With that assumption, it was in the portals of the University of Delhi when I overheard two women interacting in Nepali, it made me ask, 'Are you Nepali?' to which the reply was, 'No, we are Sikkimese'. That day it made me uncomfortable about my identity and the need to introspect. The realization dawned on me after that incident about how I had been defining myself wrongly. I could be an Indian Nepali, Nepali-speaking person, but I am Sikkimese Indian as my identity was associated first with the state of Sikkim and thereafter with the larger nation-state. The sense of discomfort was not limited to identity alone but also comprised the supposed language homogeneity. The permutations and combinations of identity and language homogeneity as one's ethnicity that I had taken for granted for everyone, aroused a sense of consciousness that left me unsettled.

Instances of this kind often come up when one speaks in Nepali outside their homeland. The immediate association of people who share a similar language and culture is often found at ease in each other's company. The other aspect that is opposite to this is the way people have certain assumptions and presumptions about a place or a language. When one is heard speaking in Nepali, questions like "Are you from Nepal?" "Is Sikkim in Darjeeling?" "Is Sikkim is Nepal?" "Where is Sikkim?" "Which language do you speak?" Questions of these order were posed to me while studying in South India but I kept thinking it was geographical ignorance

and never took it seriously in my early years as I was equally ignorant. Later when I moved to Delhi for my post-graduate studies, I realized people were aware of Sikkim but thought it was in Darjeeling and they associated Nepalis with Nepal, which made me uneasy. The sense of consistently having to state one's identity to Sikkim, India and not Nepal always kept one in a precarious position. Had there been exposure to readings of the likes of T.B Subba, A.C Sinha, and Kumar Pradhan, I would have formulated a better discourse, for the lack of such, it kept me wondering. This is not just a personal experience but it is most likely an experience of many who live in the hills of Sikkim, Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Tanka Bahadur Subba in his autobiographical essay has stated the same. One of the questions I am often asked by the people I meet is "What is the country of your origin?" to which my routine answer is "India". (Subba 214)

The need to constantly assert one's identity and state that Sikkim and Darjeeling are not the same but the language spoken in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal were all Nepali but not the same made me realize how people presume identities and places. It must be understood that the Indian Nepalis as argued by Subba state that "the Nepalis living in India do not intend to visit Nepal nor do they particularly wish to return to Nepal. They may be poor, starving, and living under inhuman conditions in India. Yet they cannot think of going back for they have nowhere to go." (Subba 230-31) is an assertion of the fact that Indian Nepalis belong here and questioning their identity puts them in a vulnerable position. Having said that identity crisis is faced not just by people in the cityscapes but is also faced by various communities at various phases.

Another aspect that needs consideration in the case of Sikkim is, that it was an independent country and the people who were two to three decades ahead of us would identify themselves as Sikkimese and the people outside Sikkim as Indians even after the merger. This can be attributed to how nation-states have appropriated the notion of boundaries and the need

for one to belong to one. It cannot be overlooked that Sikkim is a pluralistic state and besides the ethnic population, there is a large number of Bihari and Marwari population, who mostly belong to the business community along with many working-class Malayali. However, the social integration of the business communities remained limited to the city area and even social transactions like marriage and involvement in each other's community were limited. It has been a multicultural space and very pluralistic in nature, but a sense of alienation towards the Hindi-speaking community who are identified as *Madise*¹ cannot be denied. Having said that one shared the social life as much with everyone as with the people referred to as *Madise*, but a sense of boundary existed which was an unspoken boundary of them vs us which can be attributed to the different cultural practices and food habits. Even among these group of people who are casually referred to as *Madise*, there were government servants, teachers in private school, and army brethren who perhaps didn't receive the treatment but was limited mostly to certain business groups.

Therefore, the notion of identity is a multi-layered aspect of one's life and even I was mistakenly asserting my identity wrongly. Calling oneself Nepali, but tracing one's roots in Sikkim for as long as two hundred years would give a confused idea about one's identity to the person asking the question. But the identity of the larger Eastern Himalayas, a term used by Mona Chettri refers to a space which is contiguous and it shares a transcultural border meaning

¹ *Madise* and *Bhaiya* are terms used interchangeably to refer to people who had come from the plains, meaning inherently not from the hills. It is a derogatory term, but I have used it consciously despite being aware of the derogatory status attached to it, to refer to communities outside of the ethnic communities, as calling them business community alone would do away with the sense of othering that is practised. Kumar Chettri has also given a similar explanation in his reference to the word *bhaiya*. He states, that though the word 'Bhaiya' literally means 'brother' in the Hindi language, it is often derogatorily used by hill people to identify the people of Indo-Aryan origin of the plain such as Bihari, Marwari, Bengali, Punjabi and people from the other Indian states. A large number of Bihari and Marwari traders are found almost everywhere in the Darjeeling district and Sikkim Himalayas. (Chettri 195-196)

the cultures, the communities and the borders overlap leading to confusion and fluidity of identity.

Therefore, understanding the people living in the Eastern Himalayas becomes important. But that is a larger topic I do not intend to deal with, but for this research, I will look at one identity that is termed as Nepali identity. Who is Nepali and what does it entail when one identifies as Nepali? Thus, the first requirement of this work would be to draw a clear line between the Nepalese, people of Nepal and Indian Nepalis/Nepalis who are the Nepali-speaking people of India.

Identity confusion of the people of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Nepal is something that cannot be overlooked as these three places are located on the borders of the modern nation-states of India, Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal. The major attribute of an identity crisis in the region can be pointed towards the fact that the borders were fuzzy in the past and post the Indian Independence political borderlands started controlling everything. The need to examine the reason behind these overlapping and changing boundaries is also studied in the research. Traditionally, the population of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and East Nepal had seen borders as being fluid and defined by pre-existing culture, livelihood, and geography argued Mona Chettri. (Chettri 14) This is because until India was colonised, and the British came to the hills they had their wars going on owing to which borders were constantly changing. Chettri further argues that as a result of the fuzzy borders, the eastern Himalayas always have been and remain a cultural crossroad with a multi-directional flow of goods, ideas, and peoples. (Chettri 14)

To begin with, the people of Nepal are called Nepalese whereas the Nepalis of Indian origin or belonging to any other sub-continent are termed as Nepalis as laid out by Ranju R. Dhamala and is a largely accepted classification. She cites an instance from the movement for Gorkhaland where the former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi said ‘If the Nepalis of Darjeeling wanted Indian citizenship, there was no harm if they write to their king. (Dhamala

173) Statements like these are a constant reminder of the fact that they have not been accepted as natural citizens like other people in the country. They are constantly under a sense of surveillance and if something untoward happens they would be identified as immigrants. Dhamala has furthered her argument by stating that there is no confusion over the identity of Indian Nepalis as a social and cultural group as it is primarily based on their shared history, their common cultural roots, and their collective memory. The struggle for their national identity pertains mainly to the recognition and acceptance of their national identity by other Indian communities and the desire of the community members to push aside the ‘foreigner’ label. (Dhamala 173) Therefore, instances like these force one to find out the similarities between the Nepalis living in different parts of the world and the need to understand the differences when we refer to someone as Nepali. It was not just at the theoretical level but even on a personal level, this sense of confused identity needed to be understood. The larger question that I began my research was to look at the caste and gender roles and their functionality in Nepali society. But Nepali is a term used to identify a large group of people. Nepali is a term used to define the language spoken in Nepal and in certain parts of the country like Sikkim, Darjeeling, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, etc. One common mistake we make is generalizing Nepali-speaking people as Nepalese. Tapasya Thapa argues that the insecurity posed by the notion of “belonging” brings into focus the Indian Nepalis residing in various parts of India. She further argues that Indian Nepalis constitute a minority group without any privileges of being a minority in Indian society such as the Anglo-Indians and Muslims in India. (Thapa 98) Therefore, they are under constant pressure to negotiate between a local identity of “being” Nepali and a global identity of “becoming” Indian. (Thapa 98) Indian Nepalis at the national-state level and simply “Nepalis” globally. But the common trend or the accepted argument that people hold on to when one says “I am Nepali” or when one speaks Nepali is its association with the ‘Indian Nepalis within the

sovereign country Nepal in the minds of the larger Indian population. Thapa argues that this perception, however false, is that the Indian Nepalis are a population who always have the option to return to their “land of origin”. (Thapa 99) This in turn makes Indian Nepalis space invaders in a post-colonial world. One can see this in the present scenario as immigrants or refugees as Nepalis have been persecuted by the Bhutanese government and the exclusion of Lhotshampas from the state of Bhutan has made Nepalis insecure about their identity. Considering such incidents and taking into consideration the situation of Indian Nepalis, Thapa poses the big question can the Indian Nepalis ever “become” Indian or Nepalese for that matter? There is a conscious effort to detach themselves from the history of Nepal and assimilate themselves with the history of India. She drives the conclusion that the Indian Nepalis are endeavouring to make a “place” for themselves in the matrix of Indian history and therefore Indian society. Another opinion is offered by a renowned author Shri Indra Bahadur Rai who describes the “Indian Nepali Nation” as an ethnically and linguistically distinctive community of people who are of Nepali origin and are Indian citizens. However, one needs to keep in mind that the works of literature coming out of these Nepali-speaking population, no matter where they belong comes under the umbrella term of Nepali literature.

The next would be to place Nepalese in context. Nepal is a multicultural and multi-ethnic country. Nepalese are a multilingual group that speaks more than twenty languages. But the official language is Nepali and most people are “Sanskritized” to accept Nepali as a language, though they have their language. More so, they belong to the sovereign nation of Nepal despite their various linguistic and ethnic identities, they can be fairly categorized under the larger term Nepalese which is to show their belongingness to the state of Nepal argues Kumar Pradhan. (Pradhan 2)

When the people of Nepal were assimilated and Sanskritized they not only spoke one language i.e. Nepali, but they were appropriated into the caste system. This brings me to the

next topic that I would deal with in this work of research is to try and understand the caste system practised among the Nepalis both in India and Nepal.

Youba Raj Luintel has deeply studied caste in his ethnographic studies and argues that the caste system is a principal structure of social inequality that has continued to exist and tries to understand whether the caste system has itself gone through any change, in principle, forms of hierarchy, expressions of inequality, and notions of purity and pollution. He concludes with the help of Mishra that an overall transformation of Nepali society from a predominantly feudal to a more open, liberal and market-driven society has substantially reshaped the macro-context of inter-caste social relations at the local level. Interestingly, Luintel argues that the debate on caste in India has evolved mainly around the issue of whether the textual analysis of canon-like original Hindu texts depicts the true picture of contemporary forms of caste relations but rather demands a fresh and diverse understanding of inter-caste relations as it is practised in a diverse range of social life in everyday reality. (Luintel 4) To conduct his research to understand the everydayness of the caste system, he has relied on ethnographic practices, whereas, this is exactly opposite to what Luintel did. The research here intends to understand the evolvement of caste and caste practices among the Nepali communities in Nepal and India through the literature written on caste. But, it must be stated at the outset, that the initial works only mentioned caste but did not discuss the caste functions in great detail. The early mentions were limited to just a mention of *thulo jaat*² and *sanu jaat*³.

Luintel also emphasizes how the caste system has been a very side-lined subject in Nepal despite the fact that it is still a predominant system of social stratification and inequality. This pushes the research to understand the caste system through the work of Andras Hofer wherein

² *Thulo Jaat* is upper caste.

³ *Sanu Jaat* is lower caste.

he reads through the legal clauses of *Muluki Ain*⁴. *Muluki Ain* is a legal code which specifies the caste functions, gender roles, rules on commensality, rules on marriage, etc.

Madhusudan Subedi has traced the caste studies and has stated that Celestine Bouglé's theory on caste is considered a landmark theory where he laid out three defining principles of caste. They are laid out as hereditary specialization, hierarchy and repulsion. (Subedi 57) Bouglé has attributed the hierarchical aspects of castes to the religious dominance of the Brahmans. Likewise, Subedi has stated that Louis Dumont has proposed purity and pollution as the organizing principles of caste structure and hierarchy. (Subedi 58) But what Dumont has done is he has limited his work to inter-caste and not intra-caste as the way Dipankar Gupta has seen. Gupta proposes an alternative theorization of caste and says that these hierarchies are muddled. (Gupta 413) He says it is difficult to say according to one ideology who is regarded as an untouchable by whom. Thereafter, it brings me to interrogate the caste system prevalent among the Nepalis as it is equally multi-layered and not one-dimensional.

This brings me to a position where I can look at the caste system in Nepal as a variant from the way M.N. Srinivas has studied the caste system with the help of Amar Bahadur B.K who argues that Srinivas has proposed, Sanskritization as a process where a 'low' Hindu caste or tribal or other groups changes its customs, rituals and ideology and way of life in the direction of high and frequently 'twice-born' caste. (Biswakarma 5) This proposal seems to be a problem as the caste system in Nepal no doubt exists but there have been more than fair instances where it can be studied that the caste system has failed to assimilate the entire ethnic and religious groups in Nepal, no doubt it has tried to incorporate it. Kumar Pradhan states that the caste system in Nepal began with the Lichhavis. Pradhan also states the caste rules were not followed rigorously because Mongoloids and other non-Aryans formed the bulk of the population. Another reason he states for the loosely practised Hinduism is the impact of Buddhism had

⁴ *Muluki Ain* is Nepal's Civil Code.

preceded Brahmanical norms. Prayag Raj Sharma argues that a powerful instrument of extending communications across the various cultural and linguistic barriers used by the Hindus in Nepal was their language Nepali. (Sharma 292) And adds to this argument that the process of Sanskritization can be judged from the adoption of the Nepali language, shedding of tribal dress and inculcation of wider Hindu beliefs in their public life. On the contrary, Amar Bahadur B.K with the help of Dor Bahadur Bista rejects the significance of Sanskritization since it ignores the oppression and exploitation of the lower castes, and thus provides a new concept of Brahminism (Bahunbad). (Biswakarma 7) He argues that ‘Sanskritization is too broad to shed any light on the myriad kinds of dynamic changes that go on, and that the concept is too Brahmino-centric’. (Biswakarma 7) In India, castes are generally divided into five major hierarchically ranked groupings. The top four of these are the four Varna or categories described by Manu, the Hindu lawgiver, comprising the three “twice-born” (Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishya) and the Shudra. At the bottom, outside the Varna system are the untouchables. But in Nepal, castes are generally divided into four major hierarchically ranked groupings, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras at the bottom. Prayag Raj Sharma in *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal* has classified the caste groups as The *Tagadharis*⁵ or the twice-born caste, and all others under the name of *Matwalis*⁶. There are two groups of *Matwali*, those belonging to the unslaveable/ *Namasine* and those belonging to the enslavable/ *Masine*. Below *Matwali* are *Pani Chalne Chhoi Chhito Halnu Naparne* i.e. non-untouchable castes. Similarly, Biswakarma has used Prayag Raj Sharma to state that sanskritization in a traditional sense is unlikely to exert influence in Nepal in the future and its place will likely be taken by westernization of modernization. (Biswakarma 14). This fits the best argument, but it must also be considered that Nepal is a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic

⁵ The one who wears the sacred thread.

⁶ The alcohol drinking caste.

country. So, Biswakarma with the help of Dastider criticizes the state-sponsored sanskritization and states that each group whether small or large feels that the preservation and promotion of its language and culture is a fundamental right, referring to the multi-lingual and multi-cultural society of Nepal. (Biswakarma 15) Andras Hofer in *Muluki Ain* has tried to classify the pluralistic cultures and ethnic groups into a single scheme of the Hinduistic caste system. They are broadly classified as:

1. *Tagadhari*: Twice-born castes
2. *Matwali*: Drinking castes
3. *Pani na chalne chhoi chito halnu naparne*: Caste from whom water is accepted
4. *Pani nachalne chhoi chhito halnu parne*: Untouchable caste

Though this has been a very unfair classification, one can understand how the code has managed to stratify the entire caste under one group which can be called a very ‘*Bahunbad*’ classification rather than a Hindu classification. Though there have been a lot of discrepancies, most castes in Nepali society have various sub-castes and their hierarchy because of which this classification stands as a shaky one. The code has placed all the groups in broad categories undermining the fact that caste exists among these categories and functions similarly. In *Muluki Ain* there is a reference to India where it states in India *jati* is generally used with the meaning of ‘caste’ whereas since 1947 for ‘tribe’ or ‘ethnic group’ the word *Adivasi* has taken root but in Nepal, *Jaat* is associated with one’s caste. Therefore, it can be understood that the caste system in Nepal, is varied from the caste system in India, though one cannot deny that there is certain overlapping.

Another overlapping of caste is gender, which cannot be overlooked if one has to study caste as women are directly affected by the caste system. Since caste is closely associated with gender, the direct influence of caste was on women, as men did not lose their caste status even if they married outside the caste and maintained certain regulations whereas, on the other hand,

women lost their caste status if they married outside the caste. This brings me to the next question that I will be looking into, the position of women in Nepali society. With reference to *Nepali Mahila Haruko Stithi*, it can be understood that a woman had double status. As a daughter/wife, she is in an upper status and as a daughter-in-law, she is in a lower position. But one cannot deny the fact that women in Hindu society have a lower status than that of a man. The book published by Mahila Tatha Vikas Kendra further discusses that even the educated ones in the cities thought that giving equal rights to women and men would violate their traditional and religious values. This is in conjunction with the patriarchal values where a woman is considered or seen as a person of less value to a man. Nancy E. Levine argues that the majority of studies on South Asia which explicitly address gender focus on the ideal roles of Brahmin, Chettri, or ethnic women within Hindu ideology and society. (Levine 77) Taking cues from her work I would try and focus predominantly not only on women of upper caste but also women of lower caste and women belonging to various ethnic sub-groups.

The Code of Nepal (1854) which is referred to as *Muluki Ain* seems to be a relatively progressive one as it states that no one will be discriminated against on the grounds of religion, colour, caste or sex. Angul Baba Joshi says since women were considered as weaker sex in society or by the law, the punishment awarded for the crime to a woman was half of what was awarded to the men. Though there are certain rules and articles like Article 14 protecting women's rights it is very unclear in terms of women's position. Everybody was allowed to do everything respecting the traditional values because of which the interpretation of law was very difficult. Therefore, these traditional values would be an obstruction to the independence of women as they were closely connected to traditional behaviour and manners which didn't allow them to act freely. Proverbs like '*chorri ko jaat hudaina*⁷', '*chori kutera buhari tarsawne*⁸',

⁷ A daughter doesn't have a caste.

⁸ Beating a daughter to scare the daughter-in-law.

*'pothi baseko ramro haina'*⁹ and the like constantly go to prove that the position of women hasn't evolved much. This aspect needs no comparison with the Indian society and would need to be studied on its own account as different cultures have different notions of gender.

It began as a very ambitious project not realising the problem areas this research aimed to address like caste issues, gender issues and class issues in Nepali society with the help of Nepali literature, which would end up being a difficult task as Nepali literature written from various places and accessibility of it was not easy. More so, the same issues are not found in literature coming from various places, so tracking the trajectory and linearity of issues was difficult because every place had its issues to deal with. After the initial readings and findings what I have realized over my course of reading is that there is very little accessible literature available on class issues which is mostly related to the literature related with the tea garden and that in my knowledge is a genre which needs to be dealt extensively and therefore I would not be able to foray on those grounds.

Research Problem

I would limit my focus here to studying the contested functionality of caste and gender along the lines of Nepali society through Nepali literature. I will begin by majorly discussing the various cultural understandings of caste and gender as very little research has been done with literature. The perceptions people hold of hill-cultures to be comparatively very open and liberal created an urge to delve further to understand the same. But, trying to read the literature and various essays it only became more complex and to simply classify as liberal would be ill-fitting. Therefore, it became a problem and though it can be categorically said that a common thread runs between both societies (Indian as well as Nepali¹⁰) it has to be recognised the caste system functions differently in different societies. To understand the issues of caste, gender,

⁹ A woman talking or talking back is not appreciated. *Basnu*'s literal meaning talking/shouting.

¹⁰ Nepali here means the global Nepali society rather than limiting to India and Nepal.

and identity, I would use novels as it would allow for familiar settings and structure, which would make the analysis easier and tracing one genre makes it uniform.

The larger questions that this research aims to work on are- How are the Nepalis perceived? What is their identity position in the nation-state? Is ethnic plurality represented equally?

Do caste practices exist in Nepali society? Has there been any disintegration in the caste system followed by the Nepalis? What is the perception of gender in Nepali society and the influence exerted by socio-cultural practices on Nepali women? What is the relationship of Nepalis to Gorkhaland? Is the revolution for Gorkhaland viable?

Literature Review

To consider the work done on Nepali/Nepalese society the work previously carried out to understand the Nepali society was mostly limited to anthropological, ethnographical and sociological studies of the caste system and gender structures. The initial essay that led the way was an essay by Felix Hoeburger 'Folk Music in The Caste System of Nepal' which talks about the importance of preserving caste belonging to protect certain professions associated with it. This is a sociological perspective where everyone in society has been grouped according to their occupations and is a way of preserving the professions attached to that community. Likewise, Gaine's profession is studied and argued that *gaine*¹¹ is a profession which is taken up by the *Gandharvas*¹² and they are seen as an oral newspaper. This is an ethnographic study of a caste or community as it exists without problematizing it, and it focusses on the need to preserve it as a culture. Pirkko Moisala discusses how it has become difficult for the Gandharva caste to transmit it to the next generation, and to claim its ownership owing to social status and economic conditions.(Moisala 12) But, at the same time, he cites an example of Khim Bahadur

¹¹ A person from gandharva caste, who earns his livelihood by singing folk songs.

¹² As stated above, it is a singer caste.

Gayak who was disappointed by the fact that somebody from the upper caste was playing sarangi. (Moisala18) However there is a sense of regret concerning “the loss of access to music can mean the loss of groups’ sense of shared identity and, ultimately, group members’ sense of self” argued by Andrew Weintraub. (Moisala 25) This research in a way tries to understand and analyse their position in the social structure of Nepal and states how some *gaines* change their title to overcome the caste position but goes on to reinforce how changing their names and lack of economy in their profession has led to the loss of a culture associated with *gaine*. There is no sense of problematizing the caste position because people think certain castes are associated with certain professions and there is no questioning of the same.

Nancy E. Levine’s essay ‘Caste, State and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal’ argues along similar lines where they state that people in Nepal used ethnic names for economic as well as caste advantage which seemed to be a long-standing practice. Levine argues ethnic groups are linked by a regional economic and social system, and changes in a group's ethnic affiliations are coincident with changes in their economy and style of life. Levine does a case study of the Humla district and reaffirms what other scholars have noted ethnic relations today are the outcome of a historical process of accommodation between regional ethnic systems and the policies of a centralizing state. Levine has argued how limiting the anthropological studies have been because of their focus on single village studies, because of which various ethnic issues were missed and interpreted differently. (Levine 75) This states the fact that anthropological studies and ethnographic studies have not been able to understand and analyse the issues in their entirety.

Another research paper by Mary M. Cameron titled ‘Transformations of Gender and Caste Divisions of Labor in Rural Nepal: Land, Hierarchy, and the Case of Untouchable Women’ argues that contemporary forms of lower-caste women's labour in Nepal are a historical consequence of both their gender and their caste positions in society, in the context

of changing landholding relations. She talks about the *riti-bhagya*¹³ system which means the right to work for landowners in exchange for harvest shares and other material goods. (Cameron 23) It is a system where both the upper caste and the lower caste worked in unison to help each other but when their men started migrating to India that is when the women became bound by the system as they had to work for their lord and became bound labourers. Likewise, Ulrike Müller-Böker has studied Newar society in her essay, 'Spatial Organization of a Caste Society: The example of the Newar in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal'. It talks about the Newar caste system, the individual castes, and the types of interaction between them. Another article by Mary M. Cameron 'Considering Dalits and Political Identity in Imagining a New Nepal' talks about how the new Nepal is a space for hope and gives Dalits a space. Another essay which looks at the 'Changing Occupational Pattern among the Bishwakarmas: A Case Study of Hemja VDC' by Deb Bahadur Chetry talks about the current issues of changing patterns of traditional occupational skills and technologies and management of the traditional skills and technologies of Bishwakarmas of Hemja VDC from an anthropological perspective. Another work by Biswo Kallyan Parajuli on 'Gender Perspective in Traditional Occupation among Hill Dalit of Kaski' elaborates on gender perspective in traditional occupation among hill Dalit of Kaski based on a survey to explore the status of men and women and their perspectives concerning the traditional occupation among Dalit of Kaski district.

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf in his essay, 'The Inter-Relations of Castes and Ethnic Groups in Nepal' talks about the system of endogamous castes arranged in a hierarchic order is a form of social structure characteristic of India and certain neighbouring countries affected by the influence of Hinduism. He states that the recent anthropological research in various parts of India has also shown that even within the sphere of Hindu societies there is no complete

¹³ Customary land holding system on sharing basis.

uniformity in the inter-relations of castes and caste groups and that the classic division of society into four varnas is not always applicable to the local pattern.

Madhusudan Subedi's essay on 'Changes in Livelihood and Caste Relations in Udipur' talks about the relationship between caste and hereditary occupations and how it has become less significant and there has occurred a significant shift in the bases of power. There is an increase in class consciousness and a decrease in caste consciousness and wealth is replacing birth as the basis of social power and prestige. A paper titled "Caste Based Discrimination in Nepal" by Surinder S. Jodhka provides insights into several historical markers that have been responsible for the restructuring of the state including the practice of caste-based discrimination and untouchability against Dalits in Nepal. This study prominently draws attention to the diverse nature of the Dalit population which has to a greater extent revealed the in-depth nature of regional, linguistic, religious, cultural, gender and class-based discrimination and exclusion. A few more works like 'Migration and Ethnic Relations in Darjeeling and Sikkim' by T. B. Subba trace the migration history of various communities and how it has given rise to competition because of dwindling resources. Another prominent essay by Indra Bahadur Rai 'Indian Nepali Nationalism and Nepali Poetry' defines "Indian Nepali nation" as an ethnically and linguistically distinctive community of people who are of Nepali origin and are Indian citizens. Likewise, another article by Leonard Adam, 'The Social Organization and Customary Law of the Nepalese Tribes' talks about the syncretism of Tibetan, Indian and partly Chinese elements composing Nepalese culture. David. N Gellner in his essay, 'Caste, Ethnicity and Inequality in Nepal' talks about how Nepal faces an ethnic war between Parbatiyas and Madhesis. Rex. L. Jones in his essay 'Sanskritization in Eastern Nepal' talks about how the caste system of India has influenced the caste system in Nepal. Indian Social models continue to be used by Nepal in organising their own social and cultural life. It talks about the process of 'Sanskritization and discusses the interaction between a tribal group, the Limbu and high-

caste Hindus, Brahmans and Chettris. Tanka B. Subba in his essay, 'Living the Nepali Diaspora in India: An Autobiographical Essay' talks about the diasporic Nepali Indians as individuals with identity, emotions and aspirations. A thesis on Newars titled, 'Sana Guthi and the Newars: Impacts of Modernization on Traditional Social Organization' tends to highlight the traditional social organization being practised by the Newar people of Kathmandu valley of Nepal since ancient times. Newar people are regarded as the indigenous population of Nepal inhabiting the Kathmandu valley since pre-historic times. Various dissertations have studied the issues from sociological, anthropological and ethnological perspectives. Visho Raj Khatiwada's dissertation titled 'Guru Prasad Mainalika Kathama Samajik Vastvikata' is a work which states there has been some work done on the literature but the access is limited to Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. Srijana Rai in her thesis titled 'Women in Development: Study of Women's Labour Force Participation in Mountain Farming Systems with Special Reference to the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal' is again an analysis based on a field survey.

Many aspects of society have been studied in great detail but the lack of societal analysis through literature is found missing. Therefore, I would like to use literature as a medium to understand issues of caste, gender, identity and homeland in Nepali society through the literature that focuses on these issues though they share a disparate time frame.

Objective of Research

The objective of this research would be to problematise and understand the normalised/accepted caste practices. My whole aim during this research is to try and understand how these ideas are formed and circulated in a society which is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural and where people live in unison. It is in the hope of understanding the socio-cultural values and practices which would perhaps enrich the experience if understood in a better light. Through this research, I intend to fill in the gaps in understanding and analysing the age-old Nepali culture as well as the identity issue around the Indian Nepalis and their need for a homeland.

Methodology

The methodology adopted to do this research would mostly be by focussing on the primary texts and the sociological theories that have come out from Nepal. I will focus on studying caste practices, gender discrepancies, identity issues, and the need for a state through the works of Andras Hofer, Youba Raj Luitel, Uma Bhandari, Seira Tamang, A.C Sinha, T.B Subba, Kumar Pradhan, Bidhan Golay, Pravesh Jung Golay and Mona Chettri.

The first methodology this research will rely on is critical analysis as that would allow reading and thinking widely about an issue to develop a deep understanding and a point of view concerning the issue. The Second methodology adopted is historiography where issues of identity of Indian Nepalis would be read through the works of Kumar Pradhan, A.C Sinha, T.B Subba, Kumar Pradhan, Bidhan Golay, Pravesh Jung Golay and Mona Chettri. The third methodology of analysis is caste and gender theories which are mostly catered to understanding Nepali society even if the theorists are Western theorists like Gellner, Levine and Cameron, Tamang, Luitel and Bista.

Chapterization

The thesis is divided into five chapters:

Introduction

Chapter 1 : In Search of an Identity: Being and the Need for Belonging

This chapter will look into the question of identity and understand how identity is defined. Further, it will assess how one has a certain identity or does a person defines his identity. Within this chapter, it will assess if the question of identity is limited to what the nation-state defines for us. It will try and understand the need to identify cultural markers,

which are equally defining of our identity by trying to understand the various identities one bears.

Chapter 2: History of Caste System in Nepali Society

This chapter will interrogate and understand how caste functions in Nepali/Nepalese society. Can the ethnic groups and various other communities be categorized under the broad category of caste? To do so, it will trace how caste practice started in Nepal and along with that the notions of purity and pollution. With the help of three texts, it will trace the caste practices and their evolvments if any. The examination of caste and its practices will be done through the literary works of Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*, Chuden Kabimo's *Song of the Soil*, and Bhupeen's *Maidaaro*. The chapter will focus on these three texts to try and understand how far we have come as a community and how relevant caste practices are in contemporary times.

Chapter 3: Socio-religious Practices, Patriarchy and Beyond¹⁴

This chapter will attempt to understand the position of women in Nepali society and try and draw a correlation, if any, among the Nepali women living in the Indian subcontinent. The inequalities faced by women in Nepal majorly stem from socio-cultural practices, economic dynamics, and religious factors as it defines the traditional roles and responsibilities between men and women differently. This research will draw upon the socio-cultural practices, analyse the traditional values and importance attached to them, and see how some of these practices remain a replica of the age-old cultural practice. How far has the Nepali society progressed in terms of women's treatment and position in society? The works of literature that will be analysed are *Rupmati* by Rudra Raj Pandey, *Swasnimanchhe* by Hridaya Chandra Singh and *Shanti* by Liladhvaj Thapa.

¹⁴ This chapter can be found in the journal *Sāhitya* published by the author.

Chapter 4: Homeless at Home: A Continued Search for Home

The final chapter will understand the Indian Nepalis, it is imperative to recognise that they are a scattered group, mostly centred in Kalimpong and Darjeeling who have a sense of being under-recognised and feel the need for recognition. To have a sense of recognition, their demand for a home i.e. Gorkhaland needs to be studied. The repercussion of waging a revolution for a homeland is not always a homeland but manifold losses and reparations of a long-driven fight. This chapter is an attempt to trace the position of Indian Nepalis amidst the larger issues of being and wanting to belong to a nation-state.

Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the works of various Nepali writers to understand the prevalence of the caste system, the functionality of gender roles, issues of identity associated with the Nepali community of India and Nepal along with their fight for a homeland within the Indian nation-state. It might seem inconclusive in the way that it is not uniform or a linear area of research but what must be understood is that to understand this group of people who are largely identified as Nepali, it must be understood as a multi-ethnic group. To classify everyone speaking Nepali under one ethnic identity is to do away with their pluralistic nature. Therefore, this research strives to understand how a particular community who are identified as Nepali have constantly struggled with issues of identity within the Indian nation-state, their fight for a homeland, along with understanding their position of caste and gender roles.

The prejudiced attitude towards the Indian Nepalese continues even today. There could be various reasons behind this prejudice and one perhaps is as pointed out by T.B Subba that the protest towards the Indian Nepalis started when the indigenous people started realising the lack of resources with time. The other reason behind the same could be associated with the friendship treaty. The friendship treaty caused more damage than repaired the relationship

between the people of the two countries. It created a sense of insecurity among the Indians as well as Nepalese citizens by giving access to their resources to people from another country and depriving its citizens of the same, often leading to growing hatred. However, migration as a phenomenon is very peculiar to the countries in the East which can be attributed to various factors like lebensraum, lack of production, or under the official sponsorship of the British. Following such policies, migration cannot be denied, however, people with a migration history of centuries cannot forever be termed as immigrants.

The need for a place to associate and to be identified as citizens of a country cannot be underestimated in the modern world. It is conclusively stated that there is a need for the Indian Nepalis to assert their identity as Indians under the nation-state instead of adopting various nomenclatures. It must be understood that the concept of nation-state as a Western concept which when applied directly to the pluralistic community like Nepalis wouldn't justify their habitation and classification. In addition to this, the ongoing process of formulating a nomenclature even after thirty years and the questioning of the self is adding to more complexities and more differences of opinion. Rather, identity crisis can be resolved in two ways in a nation-state, one is the top-bottom approach, where the government of the state recognizes its citizens as one. Identity issues are very important but these need to be addressed from the centre and not always from the periphery. Two, when the self is aware of its position in the nation-state and must not allow it to be fluid, it would be easier to identify. The notion of Nepali identity must be challenged by the people who identify themselves as Nepalis as well as people who are grouped under the same. The Indianness of the self must be asserted first instead of harping on one's ethnicity, which would help one get rid of the tag of the foreigner or immigrant. In addition to this, the Friendship Treaty must be revised to suit the citizens and government of both the country and the porous borders that have existed for centuries must be manned to maintain a healthy relationship with an increasing need to associate with a certain

nation-state. Lastly, the plurality of the East cannot be overlooked using the rigid lens of the West even though it is a necessity of the modern world one must consider the contiguous and open borders of the Eastern Himalayas.

Likewise, to deduce the issues around caste, it must be asserted that the caste practices of Nepali people inhabiting the Eastern Himalayas might not be as rigid as the caste practices of the Indian sub-continent, but it cannot be overlooked that caste is practised. It might not function linearly as all the communities which fall under the umbrella term of Nepali or who speak Nepali, have their caste hierarchy including the various ethnic sub-groups, though not akin to the traditional caste system. As discussed with the help of Höfer various ethnic sub-groups came together to form the country Nepal, but the assimilation of people also led to the appropriation of the people in the caste system because of which different communities internalised these practices according to their suitability. Höfer has concluded Muluki Ain, stating that caste “interferes” in marriage, inheritance, occupation; in the relationship between servant and master, between patient and healer, and between the individual and the State. There seems to be only one sphere of social life which is permanently “caste-free”, namely trade and commerce as the material value of goods and services counts, and not the caste of the persons involved in the transaction. (Hofer 196) Likewise, one cannot deny or contest beyond a certain point that caste is effectively maintained within private spaces and much less in public spaces. South East Asian countries and within that Indian as well as Nepali societies are fraught with the notion of purity and pollution, so unless the notion of purity and pollution are viewed without religious appendage, caste as a practice wouldn’t change. The readings of the three texts couldn’t state otherwise, except for a minuscule change that Chitrlekha portrays, but one must never lose sight of the fact that Chitrlekha held a powerful position in society. Also, it must be noted as Höfer states that members of the same caste (*jaat*) can possess varying amounts of purity and can be separated from each other by the refusal of commensality. (Hofer

197) Likewise, Kabimo's novel depicts that commensal spaces are still caste-marked and the notion of purity and pollution is associated with people's food habits. Further, the notion of purity does not remain limited to caste hierarchy but various socio-cultural practices among the upper caste who observe *Jhutho /Sutak* etc. which is a state of temporary personal state of impurity which are independent of caste hierarchy but is relevant in the present-day society. However, from the multiple overlapping notions of purity and pollution, it may be concluded, that defilements/impurities are varied and are individualised by different communities at different levels owing to which the caste as a practice cannot be done away with easily.

About gender issues, it must be considered that the theorization of the West cannot be applied blindly to the East as these concepts and notions of gender remain unquestioned and more so many hierarchical relations like that of *sasu-buhari* are maintained and stopped from questioning. Also, most socio-cultural values are seen as stemming from religion therefore questioning them holds a negative connotation attached to it. It can be stated that though the gendered dynamics within society have been mapped out these studies leave out questions of political and economic power as they focus on the symbolic aspects of gender. The entire socio-religious culture proves that a woman is viewed with a gendered lens in a domestic space in a Hindu Nepalese society. As Uma Bhandari has argued a pure-virgin girl, a non-virgin unmarried girl, an unmarried older woman, a barren married woman, a woman who has only daughters, a mother, a widow, and a prostitute, are valued differently. It must also be understood that the notion of individuality as practiced in the west varies from the way women are socialised in the East. Bhandari has stressed on the fact that women are trained to be social, cultural, emotional, tolerant and habituated to please others. Further, the socio-religious and cultural practices have been shaped in such a way that women cannot fully put behind these practices despite their education and social mobility. This can be read in a contemporary novel like that of Prajwal Parajuly too, where one can see that not much has changed despite acquiring

education by women. Various practices have religious connotations attached to them, making it impossible to question and stop practising the same. Also, taking into consideration the socio-cultural aspects, it is mostly the upper caste women, who are affected or limited within the frame of these practices because when we consider the ethnic groups, one cannot deny, that they are comparatively liberal.

The final chapter concludes that there is a need to analyse the failure of the revolution started in the name of Gorkhaland, as a revolution so long drawn with no results. Along with it, there is a need for awareness among the common people regarding their position and their struggle for a homeland. The need to be objective rather than being swayed by the emotion of Gorkha, which if seen closely is a hollow dream. This is not to deny that a state must be granted but to question if Gorkhaland would suffice or some other name would do justice. As Golay argues academic intellectuals must engage with the concept of Gorkha and the need to associate and dissociate with the terminology of Gorkha. What is important now is to engage with the canonical texts, reading them against their grain and unsettling the discourse states Golay. Fighting for a home called Darjeeling would rather be a viable option as that wouldn't distort the identity of Indian Nepalis and as Pravesh J. Golay has argued identity is not just self-assertion but also an acknowledgement of the self by others. Lastly, a sense of consensus among the people residing in the hills concerning the nomenclature is indisputable in the demand for a state as no identity must sense a fear of being underrepresented and homeless in the search for a home. Subba has also been very pessimistic about the nomenclature and states that the replacement of the name from Nepali to Gorkha would not resolve the identity issue. (Subba 56) Therefore, the diversity within the Indian Nepalis must be acknowledged despite a fight for a state or these movements will be *phoolange* which is a rustic usage to mean trees that put out flowers which do not transform into fruit and seeds but waste away and fall off are '*phoolange*'. (Chhetri 188)

Works Cited

- Bhandari, Uma. *Women in Patriarchy*. Bhrikuti Publishing, 2014.
- Bech, Terry. "Nepal: The Gaine Caste of Beggar-Musicians." *The World of Music*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1975, pp. 28–35. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43615721.
- Bhattachan, Krishna B. Tej B. Sunar. Yasso Kanti Bhattachan (Gauchan). *Caste Based Discrimination in Nepal*. Working Paper Series. Vol. III, nos. 08, *Indian Institute of Dalit Studies*, 2009.
- Cameron, Mary M. "Transformations of Gender and Caste Divisions of Labor in Rural Nepal: Land, Hierarchy, and the Case of Untouchable Women." *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol. 51, nos. 3, 1995, pp. 215–46. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3630359.
- . "Considering Dalits and Political Identity in Imagining a New Nepal." *HIMALAYA*, vol. XXVII nos.1-2, 2007, PDF download.
- Chhetri, Kumar. "A Comment on The Gurkha's Daughter." *SOCIAL TRENDS*. vol.2 no. 1, March 2015, pp. 189-97.
- Chhetri, Lekhnath. *Fruits of the Barren Tree*. Anurag Basnet, Trans. Penguin Random House, 2021.
- Chettri, Mona. *Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy*. Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
- Chetry, Deb Bahadur. *Changing Occupational Pattern Among The Bishwokarma: A*

Case Study of Hemja VDC, Kaski. 2008. Tribhuvan University, Dissertation

Master's Degree.

Chatterjee, Partha. *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*.

Princeton University Press, 1994.

Dangol, Niraj. *Sana Guthi And The Newars: Impacts of Modernization on Traditional*

Social Organizations. 2010. University of Tromsø, Thesis Master of Philosophy.

Dhamala, Ranju R. "Identity Formation and Identity Maintenance: Nepalis in India.

Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives, Tanka Bahadur Subba, et al,

pp.168-174. Concept Publishing Company, 2009.

Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and Making of Modern India*.

Princeton University Press, 2001.

Dumont, Louis. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implication*. Chicago

University Press, 1980.

Golay, Pravesh Jung. "Ethnic Identity Crisis, History and Cultural Anthropology: Some

Reflections". Indian Nepalis Issues and Perspectives, edited by T.B Subba et al.,

Concept Publishing Company, 2009, pp. 49- 62.

Gupta, Dipankar, "Caste and Politics: Identity over System." *Annual Review of*

Anthropology, vol. 34, no.1, 2005, pp.409-427.

———. *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*. Penguin Books, 2000.

Gellner, David N. "Caste, Ethnicity and Inequality in Nepal." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, nos. 20, 2007, pp. 1823–28. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/stable/4419601.

Haimendorf, Christoph Von Fürer. "The Inter-Relations of Castes and Ethnic Groups in Nepal." Feb. 2009, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* vol. 2, no.1, pp. 243. PDF download.

Hoerbuerger, Felix. "Folk Music in the Caste System of Nepal." *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, vol. 2, 1970, pp. 142–47. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/2307/767432.

Hofer, Andras. *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*. Himal Publishing, 2012.

Jones, Rex L. "Sanskritization in Eastern Nepal." *Ethnology*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1976, pp. 63–75. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3773080.

Jodkha, Surinder S. *Caste: Oxford India Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Levine, Nancy E. "Caste, State, and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, Feb.1987, pp. 71–88. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/stable/2307/2056667.

- Leonhard, Adam, "The Social Organization and Customary Law of the Nepalese Tribes." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 38, nos. 4, 1936, pp. 533–47. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/662459.
- Müller-Böker, Ulrike. "Spatial organization of a caste society: The Example of the Newar in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal." *Mountain Research and Development*, vol. 8, No. 1, 1988, pp. 23-31.
- Parajuli, B. K. (2011). Gender Perspective in Traditional Occupation among Hill Dalit of Kaski. *Himalayan Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 4,28–48.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/hjsa.v4i0.4666>.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33–40. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25595469.
- Rai, Indra Bahadur. "Indian Nepali Nationalism And Nepali Poetry." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1994, pp. 149–54. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25797504.3.
- Subedi, Madhusudan. "Caste in South Asia: From Ritual Hierarchy to Politics of Difference." *Politeja*, vol. 40, 2016, pp. 319–40. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24920210.
- . "Changes in Livelihood and Caste Relations in Udipur." *Himalayan Journal of Sociology & Anthropology*. vol. VI,2014, PDF download.

———. Some Theoretical Considerations on Caste. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*. vol. 7, 2013, PDF download.

Subba, T.B., et al., eds. *Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives*. Concept Publishing, 2009.

———. “Living the Nepali Diaspora in India: An Autobiographical Essay.” *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie*, vol. 133, nos. 2, 2008, pp. 213–32. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25843148.

———. “Migration and ethnic relations in Darjeeling and Sikkim.” 2010. PDF download.

Thapa, Tapasya. “Being and Belonging: A Study of the Indian Nepalis”

Tripathi, Sudha. *Nepali Upanyasma Naariwad*. Bhrikuti Publishing, 2012.