

# Caste and Social Domination

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Most of the eastern societies are structured hierarchically. It is the main part of their culture. This view extends from caste system to food, power & position, language, sex, wealth and so on. The concept of dominance and subordination is common among the *Parbatiyas* and *Newars* in Nepal as it is determined by caste. In addition to it *Barna* system also contributed to it.

Social domination among the rural populace including Kathmandu valley is an old practice. Its history goes back to ancient time. The traditional *Hindu* society has been hierarchically structured. Later on professional division of the society ultimately introduced caste system which is the main component of social dominance in Nepal. This system was first introduced by King Jayasthiti Malla of Kathmandu.<sup>1</sup> Since then it has not witnessed significant changes in the hierarchical status. Thus, it has deep rooted norms in the formation and setting of Nepalese culture. Perhaps the lower strata and other menial groups in the society are showing growing interest on '*Sanskritization*'. Although the higher strata still remained as a dominant class. All

things, groups and people must fit in higher, equal or lower strata. Castes are either superior, more or less equal or inferior. This view is not limited, it extends to gods, animals, food, clothing, language, occupation, social respect of *Darshan* and *Namaste* etc. This social hierarchy denotes social inequalities, status differentials, power, etc. The higher strata dominate their subordinates. They in turn seek to dominate to them who belong to a lower strata.<sup>2</sup>

"Man is superior to woman. She must obey his just orders." This view is equally applicable to the Nepali Muslims.<sup>3</sup> A mother is superior to children. She always dominate and impose her way of thinking over them. But the situation is somewhat different when a son attains puberty or adulthood. A child must obey his seniors, but it is seen that even a younger sibling is dominated by a child. It continues from generation to generations. Thus, it is clear that those in authority dominate those who lack it.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, social domination & subordination is the major component of culture. But there is variations in degree of

observance. Even in advance societies it is observed in term of wealth, power & position and human relationship. But in countries like Nepal and India it is a common phenomenon. Therefore, it remains at the axis of our culture. Its absence or eradication means lack of the major component of socio-cultural phenomenon.

The lower group is always dominated by the higher one. It creates various social dynamics. Governing factors on social domination are-caste, religion, wealth, language, education, intoxication, occupation, political behaviour, social unity, matrimonial alliances, and so on. In practice factors like wealth, political power, education, occupational status and so forth operate within, as well as between, castes to produce important internal inequalities of status. But sometimes in the Indian caste system, it is these inequalities and status differentials which lead to caste fission and sub-caste formation validating this claim by a modification of their ritual behaviour in the direction of accepted Brahmanical standards.<sup>5</sup> But in the Nepalese case considerable prosperity and wealth despite their low social position remains so far without influence on their position in interpersonal relations.<sup>6</sup> Social domination in a sense is the prestige. So, every strata prefer to dominate its belonging groups. Caste hierarchy is the main functioning element of socio-cultural order in Nepal. The caste system not only depends on the maintenance to a status equivalence of the individuals belonging to the same caste.<sup>7</sup> It is a traditional Hindu culture. It led to the static socio-cultural life in the rural areas and people are culturally habituated to see things in term of traditional forms.<sup>8</sup> This type of socio-cultural trend contributed to

the stronghold of caste system in the country among *Parbatiyas* and *Newars* ultimately contributed in maintaining the practice of social domination. Caste concept is the major functioning element of social domination in Nepal. But in such a society where there is caste hierarchy also exhibit social domination determined by other factors.<sup>9</sup>

Caste is determined by birth which is natural. In a general sense man belongs to a caste. The verses in *Byakarna Shastra* clearly noted-<sup>10</sup>

“आकृति ग्रहण जाति लिङ्गानान्चन सर्व भाक् ।  
सकृदाख्यात निर्गह्या गोत्रं च चरणौः सह ॥

In the same way the *Muhabhasya* text further explained-<sup>11</sup>

प्रादुर्भाव विनाशभ्यां सत्वस्य युगपद् गुणैः ।  
असर्वलिङ्गा वह्वर्था तां जातिकवयो विदुः ॥

But during the course of time caste has been evolved to different nature dividing the whole population to various groups. The population breakdown by caste & clan have been stressed because there are contexts in which cleavage between the caste is relevant whereas in others the dominant cleavage is between the clans of the high castes.<sup>12</sup> Yet, even the hierarchy of castes, appears to determine every individual's status and function in the society of Nepal.<sup>13</sup>

The *Kshetriya* and *Baishyas* groups are of identical stock but of considerably lower status than Brahmin. They must put their forehead on a *Brahmin's* foot as social morality prescribes. In the same way, the *Sudra* or untouchables do *Namaskar* (*Darshan Malik* or *Bajey*: i.e. “respect my lord” or priest) to him. Although it is a form of respect but almost determined

by their dominant status. It denotes to the social stratification in the Nepalese society. A *Brahmin* is recognised as the mediator between man and god.<sup>14</sup> It has accumulated a higher degree in giving social respect. In fact it is rightful to say in the Nepalese context that—<sup>15</sup>

ब्राम्हणं दशवर्षतु शतवर्षतु तु भूमिपम्  
पिता पुत्रौ विजानियाद् ब्राम्हणस्तुयो पिताः ॥

(A *Brahmin* of ten years of age is like a father of a hundred years old *Kshetriya*.)

The high status in the caste hierarchy is by no means always correlated with a high economic status, and many *Brahmin* peasants are no wealthier than their neighbours of other ethnic groups.

The villages around Kathmandu city have heterogeneous caste and ethnic composition. In such areas castism is more clear and strong than other homogeneous villages. The *Brahmins* occupied highest status in the social structure followed by the *Kshetriyas*. It is a traditional phenomenon regulated since Vedic and early Vedic era. The term *Brahmin* denoted to a scholar in the Vedic civilization. They socially, religiously and culturally are authorised to dominate other lower caste groups who lacked the authority status and power. The higher strata occupied dominating status. It lead them to favour the hierarchical social structure in the country. It creates various social dynamics in the hierarchical social context. Particularly, the untouchables have been dominated in a supressing degree in the society, do not favour to maintain castism and socio-cultural differentiation because they have been influenced by the process of *Sanskritization*. But lower caste group is supposed to give respectful tribute to the higher strata. The legal code of 1910 V.S. has clearly

demarcated between high and low caste and secured the dominant position of the higher caste.<sup>16</sup> The fixation of punishment by the law was determined by castes status<sup>17</sup>. It has classifed caste as *CHOI CHHITO HALNU NAPARNEY* (touchable) and *CHOI CHITO HALNU PARNEY* (untouchables). The former is pure caste whereas the latter indicated to the impure. In term of the hierarchy of dominance and subordination this division is fundamental—the first order of segmentation in fact. The caste has continuous hierarchy running from the *Brahmin* at the top to the lowest caste of untouchables at the bottom. The demarcation line between them is 'Water Line'. Any type of change below the line is irrelevant to the caste in the dominant block so long as this change does not affect the basic pattern of collective dominance and subordination that exists between two blocks.<sup>18</sup> If a member of higher class is contaminated by an untouchable he must be purified by *Sun Pani* (Gold water). It may be called *return of caste*. Perhaps it is a surmon to particular person not to repeat such an incident of contamination. Although it has been changing in major urban areas but still remain as a traditional norm in rural areas. The civil code of 2020 V.S has declared equal social status of all citizens discriminating the conception of caste.<sup>19</sup> It has brought some changes in the way of thinking.

But people are well trained to think on traditional way. Socially, the institution of Brahmanism is highly celebrated phenomenon in the Nepalese society. The Thakuri and *Kshetriya* rulers since *Baisi* and *Chaubisi* era lent the whole power of the governmental machinery to the enforcement of Brahmanical values

and invested the *Raj Guru* (Royal priest) with the authority to regulate behaviour in many spheres of life and to adjudicate caste disputes.<sup>20</sup> In all and every rituals, religious festivals and observance of sacred medias etc, his presence is compulsorily required. But growth of urban culture and process of 'Westernization' have somewhat lessened the roles of *Brahmins* the society. But *Brahmanism* in its traditional form is 'profit and prestige'. But this changing pattern has not brought revolutionary changes yet to keep all castes in a linear form. All these factors contribute to maintain a traditional society, orthodox outlook on social behaviour and static cultural phenomenon. After all a *Brahmin* always procures *Brahmins*. They have their most important social links within a rural society. They are usually priests with clients (*Jajman*) with a very wide area and wealthiers among them are money lenders.<sup>21</sup> Their relation with pure castes is *Jajmani* tie. But professional service and agricultural labourers link them with lower caste. No doubt that the caste specific work of a *Brahmin* is to be a priest to serve up to *Baishya* level. But sometimes their superior status keeps them from socio-political activities. In some parts of Nepal the *Brahmins* never contest election as they have to mix up with various caste groups as a political leader.<sup>22</sup> They remain as a dominant group in every societies whether they survive through ploughing.<sup>23</sup> In turn of their domination every group dominate their subordinate.

The *Kazi* (nobility) is a respectable term used to address a *Kshetriya*. They form ideally a homogeneous, endogamous caste free from the tendency to split into

status determined subdivisions characteristic of many Indian castes. In the absence of status differentials between numerous named clans, they appear as an ethnic group conscious of its identity despite of its dispersal over the greater part of Nepal.<sup>24</sup> They are subordinate to *Brahmins* in the hierarchy.

The *Sudras* or untouchables are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Majority of them live in deteriorate financial condition. The caste system discriminates their social status and gulf between high castes and untouchables. Untouchability is limited to the caste society of *Parbatiyas* and *Newars*. They are treated as untouchables even by their tribal neighbours. There are large number of untouchables in Nepal, and some of them achieved considerable property despite of their low status. But such wealth remains so far without influence on their position in interpersonal relations.<sup>25</sup> They have separate residential areas in the village.

An untouchable can buy goods in village shops. But he must keep himself from touching to others. Usually, they are addressed in such a style normally reserved for lower status people whereas he must address using respectful terms to members of high class. Basically, the untouchables within the *Parbatiya* and *Newar* social structure are Hindus.<sup>26</sup> But sometimes cultural behaviour differ to the higher strata. There are differences in kinship and marriage institution.<sup>27</sup> Sexual intercourse and interdining with untouchables are among the greatest offences in the society which a member of clean caste can commit and excommunication is the automatic consequence. Although, the existing civil code

discriminates castism, there are nevertheless cases of high caste living with untouchable women. They thereby lose their caste status and completely cut themselves from the society of their kin and caste fellows.<sup>23</sup> Now-a-days the untouchables *Damai* (tailors), *Sarki* (shoemakers), *Podey* (sweepers), *Kasahi* (butcher), and other are increasingly realising that as a group they belong to the Nepalese society. They began to believe on the notion that-

'All men are equal  
Caste has been abolished'

But existing social structure and stratification led them to the status of sub-ordinate class.

#### **Social Domination :- A micro level study in a Nepalese village:-**

A research schedule was pursued in Katunje village having heterogeneous ethnic character to excavate facts relating to social domination. This article is the result of the field research.

Katunje is one among twenty one village panchayats in Bhaktapur district. It adjoins town panchayat in the north whereas other parts adjoin to other village panchayats. At present this village is evolved as a sub-urban area due to availed modern physical facilities, educational opportunity and easy convenience.

It represents kaleidoscopic divergent ethnic view of the Nepalese society. The major ethnographic feature is its heterogeneous culture. It is inhabited by all four major caste groups i.e. *Brahmins* and *Jaishis*, *kshetriyas*, *Newars*, and *Parbatiya untouchables*. But the village population is predominantly occupied by *Brahmin* and *kshetriyas*. Thus, it may be considered as a representative village to study heterogeneous

Nepalese culture. This is the major cause to pursue field research in this village to study interrelationship between caste and social domination.

The *Newars*, *Damais* & *Sarkis* are united within their clan than *Brahmin*, *Jaihi* and *kshetriyas*. Their *Guthi* organization caste status and sometimes political activities bring them in a linear form of caste and social integration. Although, male population no matter what age spend morning and evening time in tea stall in gossiping and drinking tea. It is the waste of most productive labour. It has brought about bad impact in the society; it has decreased in the quality of population. But such places are centres of socio-cultural assimilation and interaction. Sometimes, gatherings lead to factional division. Social status of an individual is easily observed in tea stalls. Domination and social discrimination is very common in such centres. The frequency of untouchables coming to tea stalls is low in comparison to high caste customers.

Basically, the village society survives through agricultural and labour works. Usually, low caste people are farm and construction labourers but sometimes they collect fuel wood from nearby jungle and sell in the village. The high caste people generally work in their own farm. Besides, majority of them are service holders in towns.

Untouchables, during their work are prohibited from touching water pot and food, which is used by labourers of other castes.

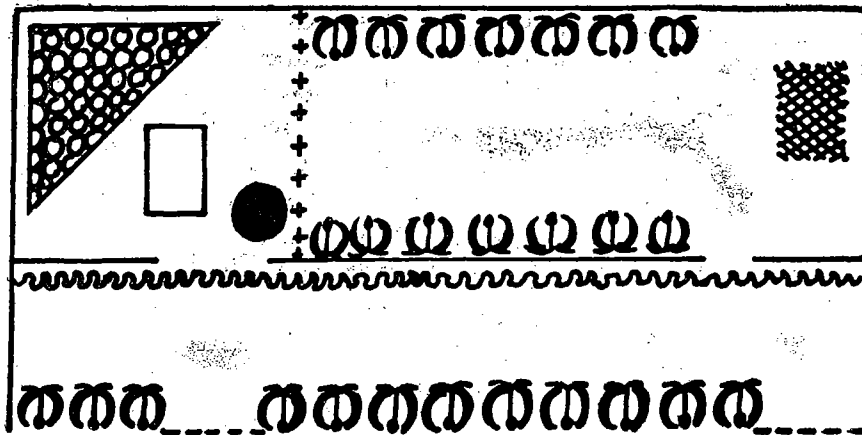
Still the practice of '*CHHITO HALNEY*' is observed by *Brahmins* and other society

elders. It is not so popular among the youths. But it does not mean that they have broad outlook to think beyond the horizon of caste. In spite of common festive celebrations in the village, other cultural traditions have significant differences.<sup>29</sup> Most of the rites and rituals are observed independently according to their tradition and clan system. The cultural activities during the life cycle have variations between high and low castes. In many cases their activities and behaviour are concerned with 'dominance and sub-ordination'.

The status of caste in village tea stalls which determines 'dominance and subordination' is illustrated in figure no-1. Even an untouchable can purchase goods in village shops. But desired goods are given without touching him or vice versa while paying.

Fig. no. 1

General complex of tea stalls and interaction with high/low caste customers.



- ▨ — Main cooking boiling complex
- — Tea milk boiling complex.
- — Shopping complex.
- — Shopkeeper's seat
- ∩ — Customer's seat (inside)
- ~ — An untouchable can go up to this line when nobody is sitting outside. All other customers except untouchables can go inside.
- ∩ — Customer's seat (outside)
- — Boundry for untouchables when outside seats are occupied by high caste customers.
- + + — Boundry between Customer's seating and shopping complex' No Customer is allowed to enter here.

The domination in term of caste is "seen & felt" in Katunje which is almost common. This is the same case in other rural parts of Nepal. No doubt that it is a social evil in the process of social development. Therefore, social progress and ethnic harmony is possible eradicating such an evil element. In fact 'castism' in Nepal is a 'cultural reality' having negation in socio-cultural progress.

### Foot note

\*This article is the outcome of empirical research persuaded in a heterogeneous (ethnic) Nepalese village confined to intercaste relationship. The field research was persuaded during March-April 1988. It has reproduced various important factors relating to social dominance and subordination.

- 1) Chandra Bikram Budhathoki, *Jayasthiti Malla Ko Sudhar*, Lalitipur, Sajha Prakasan, 2039, PP. 1-23
- 2) S.C. Dube, *Indian Village*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959, PP. 234-35.
- 3) Shanker Thapa, *Marriage in Muslim Society: A Case Study of Birganj Based Muslims* Kathmandu, T.U., Institute of Humanities & Social Sciences, Dean's Office 1986, PP.18-19  
also see S. Thapa, "Conceptualization of marriage in Islam," *Voice of History* vol IX-XI, No.1, Kathmandu, T.U., History Dept. 1986 Dec., PP. 1-7.
- 4) Dube, *op. cit.*,
- 5) Collen Roser, "Social mobility in the Newar Caste system," in C.V.F. Haimendorf (ed) *caste and kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, New Delhi, Sterling Publisher, 1978, P-73.
- 6) Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, 'Unity and Diversity in the Chetri Caste of Nepal', in Haimendorf (ed), *op. cit.*, P-22.
- 7) Collin Roser, *op. cit.*, PP. 72-73.
- 8) Bengt- Erik Brogstorm, *The Patron and The Panca : Village Values and Panchayat Democracy in Nepal*, Stockholm, University of Stockholm, 1976, PP.54-56.
- 9) For an instance, the society of South Korea is homogeneous. There is no caste system. But social domination is practised in term of wealth, social status, power, human relationship, education etc.  
-Shanker Thapa, *Islamization Process in Korea*, Seoul, The Academy of Korean Studies, Nov. 1987, (unpublished research report).
- 10) Rajani Kant Shastri, *Hindu Jatika Utthan Aur Patan*, (in Hindi), Allahabad, Kitab Mahal, 1985, P. 164.
- 11) *Ibid*,
- 12) Patricia Caplan, *Priest and Cobblers*, London, Chandler Publishing Company, 1972, PP. 16-17.
- 13) Christoph Furer von-Haimendorf, *op.cit.*, PP. 82-83.
- 14) Shanker Thapa, *Sacred Complex Concept As Conceived by Nepali Muslims* (unpublished article) P. 5-6,
- 15) Shastri, *op. cit.*, P-166.
- 16) *Sri Panch Surendra Bikram Shah Dev ko Pala ma Baneko Muluki Ain* 1910 V.S. (The civil code enacted during the reign of King Surendra Bikram Shah), Kathmandu, Ministry and Law and Justice, 2022, PP-276, 277, 407-12, 551-52, 553-54, 653-54, 655-70, 674, 676-77, 678-81.
- 17) Tulsi Ram Vaidya and Tri Ratna Manandhar, *Crime And Punishment in Nepal*, Kathmandu, Bini & Purna, 1985, PP. 60-82.
- 18) Collin Roser, *op. cit.*, P- 88.
- 19) *New Civil Code 2020 V.S.*, Kathmandu,

- Ministry of Law and Justice, 2022.
- 20) Haimendorf, *op.cit.*, P- 24.  
also see, *Sripanchi Surendra Bikram Shah ko Pala Ma Baneko Ain 1910 V.S op.cit.*, PP-379  
(Column of DHARMADHIKARKO)
- 21) Patricia Caplan, *op. cit.*, PP. 10-17.
- 22) *Ibid*, PP. 74-75.
- 23) Lionel Caplan, *Land and Social Change in East Nepal*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1970, P.76-97.
- 24) Haimendorf, *op. cit.*, P-27.
- 25) *Ibid*, P-22
- 26) R.R. Subedi, "Damaiko Basti"(settlements of Tailors)", *Nepali Sanskriti* 4:1, Kathmandu Sanskritic Sansthan, Pausha Chaitra 2044, PP. 27 - 32.
- 27). P. Caplan, *op. cit.*, P-11.
- 28) Haimendorf, *op. cit.* P-22.
- 29) *Bhairav Yatra* is participated by all ethnic groups but basically it is the festival of *Newars* celebrated in the second day of Baisakh. But in recent years other ethnic groups both high and low, began to participate in the festival. *Brahmin*, *Jaishi* and *kshetriyas* youths carry on the *Bhairab Charriots* whereas the *Dama*s play musical instrument and *Sarkis* perform dance during *yatra* procession. Even at this festival the demarcation of caste is highly maintained by the participants. But those *Sudras* are not prohibited to enter the temple for worship purposes.