

THE NEPALI SYSTEM OF HONORIFIC REGISTERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Analyses of South Asian honorific systems usually make two assumptions. The first is that honorific categories can be identified on the basis of pronominal morphology. The second is that these categories (usually considered to be three in number) can be ranked along a single dimension of verbal respect.¹

For example, Das distinguishes between three grades of address forms in Bengali, corresponding to the three Bengali second person pronouns:

The first important thing to be noticed in Bengali forms of address is in its use of second personal pronouns. Bengali has three forms in second person: *apni*, *tumi* and *tui* all meaning *you*, the difference being 'honorific', 'ordinary' and 'inferior or intimate' respectively.²

All treatments of the Nepali honorific system known to this writer fall within the above tradition. That of T. W. Clark, which is the most complete, distinguishes three honorific grades based on the three second person pronouns *tā*, *timi* and *tapāī*:

tā is a low grade honorific; *timi*, a middle grade honorific; *tapāī*, a high grade honorific. *tā* is used in familiar speech to children and junior servants. It should not ordinarily be used by foreigners. *timi* is used among friends and to more senior servants. *tapāī* is the form regularly used in polite conversation. The beginner is advised always to use it except when addressing persons known to be servants, when he may use *timi*.³

Although the honorifics are ranked in terms of a single continuum, their usage as described by Clark implies two criteria: social ranking, and familiarity,

¹ I do not disagree with the position that a single complex dimension (i. e. social distance) may contain diverse aspects such as power and solidarity (see Dhanesh Jain 1973). The real issue is whether we are justified in making a universalistic distinction of three ranked categories.

² Das, p. 19

³ Clark, p. 71

or solidarity. ⁴ *timī* is used among friends, whereas *tapāl* is used in "polite conversation"—and is recommended to foreign speakers of Nepali, whose relationships with Nepalese would tend to be relatively formal (non-solidary). Thus the threefold ranking, if applicable, would seem to require additional elaboration.

Moreover, if the verbal morphology of Nepali is taken into account, the picture becomes even more complex. A special set of inflections (the *garibaksios* forms) occurs in addition to the three honorifics listed by Clark. These forms, which are not associated with any second person pronoun, are "used in court and high social circles with reference to senior persons. *hoibaksincha* ('is') is higher in the honorific scale than *hunuhuncha* (also 'is')...." ⁵

There are also two types of infinitive constructions which function as request forms, and which appear to occupy a position intermediate between Clark's middle and high grade honorifics. These are the infinitive ending in *-nū* (*V-nū*), and the infinitival participle ending in *-ne* (*V-ne*). ⁶ If both the *garibaksios* forms and the infinitives are taken into consideration, it may be necessary to distinguish five or more grades of honorifics in Nepali.

2 THE SURVEY

As it was apparent that a threefold distinction of ranked honorifics could not predict all the actual occurrences of Nepali honorific usage, a survey was conducted in Kathmandu in order to obtain empirical data. ⁷ The sample consisted of 47 Nepalis, most of whom were men ranging in age from 18 to 34. It was varied with respect to caste and place of origin, but there were no low caste speakers and no speakers who did not have at least a high school education. Thus the typical respondent is an educated middle class male. The speaker's mother tongue varies as a concomitant of other factors and these languages include Nepali, Newari, Hindi and on one case, Limbu.

Each respondent was provided with a list of six types of sentence, representing

⁴ Defined on p. 222.

⁵ The *garibaksios* forms, which are associated with the highly respectful title *hajur*, are restricted to the speech of Kathmandu Chetri for the most part. See Clark, p. 271 for a description of these forms.

⁶ "(*V-nū*) is not high grade honorific; it is a variant of the second person plural forms given above, i.e. *gara*, *āū* (middle grade honorifics) etc., but in use it is felt to be somewhat politer or less familiar than they are." See Clark, p. 125; also Schmidt pp. 45, 49-50.

⁷ Survey conducted during December 1967.

the six possible honorifics. The questionnaire presented fifty different categories of addressed individuals, and the respondent was asked to choose one of the six honorifics as a suitable address styles for each of the hypothetical addressees. When this task was completed he was asked to review the questionnaire and recommend appropriate usage for foreign speakers of Nepali (generally American and European visitors to Nepal).⁸

The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide a general description of the way in which an educated Nepali of medium socio-economic status uses honorifics in speaking to the types of persons listed in the questionnaire. We did not wish to account for specific deference relationships, but for factors responsible for variation in a range of possible usage in idealized dyadic situations.

Table I classifies the fifty categories of individuals according to the level of honorific predominantly assigned to them. Although there is a good deal of variation in usage, a fairly clear pattern of agreement emerges with regard to 45 of the 50 categories, with over half of the respondents⁹ assigning one of the six possible forms to those categories. In 29 out of 50 categories, the agreement is 66% or higher.

There is also a clear tendency to use either middle or high grade honorifics (hereafter referred to as Levels B and C), in preference to low grade honorifics (Level A), *garibaksios* (Level D), or *V-nū* and *V-ne*. 43 out of 50 categories were classified by the respondents as suitable for one of these two levels.

Variation is also unlikely to occur between these levels, whereas it occurs frequently between Levels A and B, or Levels C and D. The basic choice in assigning honorifics thus appears to be a binary one, with Levels B and C forming the core of the system.¹⁰

While these data do not seem to contradict Clark's generalizations about the use of middle and high grade honorifics, they do not provide a basis for establishing a threefold classification of honorifics in the traditional manner. I shall argue that

⁸ Supplement I, p. 15. See p. 14 for a list of sample sentences.

⁹ That is, over 50% of those responding to a particular category (total responses in that category) agree on assignment of one of the six possible forms. I would like to thank Frank Southworth for suggesting this method of analyzing the data.

¹⁰ This resembles the binary distinction between T and V forms described by Roger Brown for European languages. p. 254.

TABLE I: DISTRIBUTION OF HONORIFICS (Total=47)

	A tā gar	B timī gara	V-nū garnū	V-ne garne	C tapāl gar- nūhos	D hajur gari- baksios	Predom- inant Response % of Total
1. Animals	47						100
2. Servant who cleans in one's home	25	21					54
3. Friend of own age (in- formal conversation)	19	22		1	2	3	47
4. Dhobi	17	25	2	1	1		54
5. Porter	17	25	1	1	2		54
6. Cows	17	29				1	62
7. 2-3 year old brother or sister	17	28			1		61
8. Younger brother	16	30			1		64
9. Younger sister	15	31			1		60
10. Friend, younger (in- formal conversation)	13	27	1	1	5		57
11. Rickshaw puller	11	32		2	2		68
12. Servant who cleans hotel room	11	31	4	1			66
13. Bearer in hotel where one is living, whom one calls by name	10	32	2	3	2		68
14. Chaukidar	8	34	1	2	2		72
15. Cook in one's own home	8	31	1		4		70
16. Ayah (one's own home)	4	33	4	2	3		72
17. Younger nephews and nieces	3	32	8	2		1	70
18. Hotel bearer (place where one has gone for dinner only)	2	35	6	1	3		74
19. Younger sister-in-law	1	36	2	3	5		77
20. Restaurant waiter	1	35	3	3	5		74
21. Cook in friends' home	1	29	6		11		62
22. Ayah, home of friends		25	4	2	15		54
23. Fruit or vegetable seller		25	3	3	16		53
24. Younger brother-in-law	1	20	2	2	14		43
25. Friend, younger (dur- ing work)	4	23	2	1	17		49
26. God	10	10			13	12	29
27. Tailor	2	17	1	4	22		48
28. Bus conductor		14	3	5	23		51
29. Friend, older (informal conversation)	2	12	3	3	24		55

* Not all respondents answered all 50 items in the questionnaire.

TABLE I (continued)

	A	B	V-nū	V-ne	C	D	% of Total
30. Friend own age (during work)	5	11		3	27		59
31. Elder brother-in-law	1	2			28	15	61
32. Father's sister		3	1	1	30	12	64
33. Mother's sister		3		2	30	12	64
34. Parents		1			30	13	68
35. Elder sister		5			31	11	66
36. Elder brother		4			31	11	67
37. Father's brother		3			31	13	66
38. Mother's brother		2			32	13	68
39. Friend, older (during work)	1	8	3	1	34		72
40. Policeman	1	9	2	1	34		72
41. Elder sister-in-law		4			35	8	74
42. Clerk, bookshop		4	2	3	38		81
43. Proprietor, cloth shop		5	1	2	39		83
44. Clerk, post office		2	2	3	39		85
45. Clerk, bank		2	1	2	42		89
46. Proprietor, bookshop		3	1	1	42		89
47. Proprietor, medical hall		2	1	1	43		91
48. Officer at checkpost on Tribhuvan Rajpath		2	1		44		94
49. Airline booking girl, RNAC			1		45	1	96
50. Teacher or professor					46	1	98

in fact the Nepali honorific system consists of four distinct *honorific registers*¹¹ which are developed by means of a two step process of binary distinctions. The first distinction bifurcates the system into two *basic registers*, and the second one produces a set of *secondary registers* in each basic register (see Diagram, P. 218.)

In addition, it will be argued that V-nū and V-ne are not part of the honorific system at all, but neutral or impersonal forms which provide a means of avoiding the necessity of using any honorific.

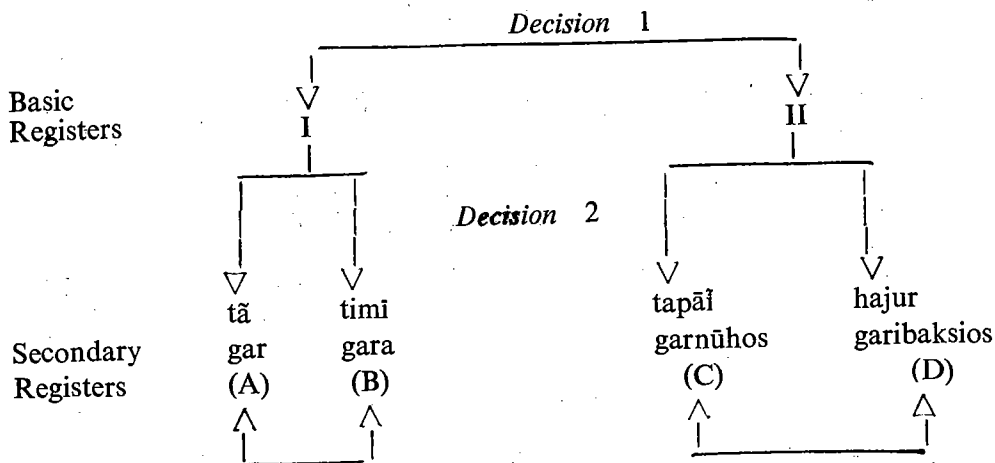
¹¹ The term "honorific register" refers to a hierarchy of associated morphological categories -- in this case, of associated pronoun and verb forms. A speaker chooses to perform in a certain register in response to a given socio-cultural situation. The term is adopted here in order to distinguish the Nepali system from other honorific systems which rely mainly on the use of titles (such as "Mr.," "Sir" and the like).

Finally, the factors governing the use of honorifics toward matched sets of categories (identical except for one characteristic) will be examined, in order to determine the socio-cultural dimensions of the system.

3. THE BASIC REGISTERS

The decision to distinguish basic and secondary registers is based primarily on the pattern of predominant responses to the questionnaire categories. These indicate for greater agreement with respect to distinguishing between Levels B/C than between A/B or C/D. This is the pattern we would expect to find if the decision making process for choosing an honorific is binary in nature. In effect, the speaker sorts individuals into categories which might loosely be labelled "gara and lower" versus "garnuho and higher"; and then he further sorts these categories.

The following diagram describes this process. Switching between A/B or C/D is possible, as indicated by the arrows.



There is an additional justification for distinguishing between basic and secondary registers, in that a reduced system, consisting mainly of Levels B and C, is recommended by the respondents for foreigners. Levels A and D appear in this light as residual categories, specific to culturally unique situations in which foreigners are unlikely to find themselves.

4. V-NŪ AND V-NE

These infinitives are widely distributed, with either V-nū or V-ne occurring in 34 out of 50 categories. However, they occur infrequently, accounting together for more than 10% of total responses only in 13 categories (Table II). These include a number of cases where there is variation between assigning Registers I and II (Categories No. 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28 and 29). This provides one clue to the function

of the infinitives: they serve as a means of handling ambiguous cases—individuals who for one reason or another do not fit neatly into an arbitrary binary classification.

TABLE II: DISTRIBUTION OF *V-nū* and *V-ne*. (Total =47)

	<i>V-nū</i> and <i>V-ne</i> (No. of occurrences)	% of Total Responses
12. Servant who cleans hotel room	5	11
16. Ayah, own home	6	13
17. Younger nephews and nieces	10	22
18. Hotel bearer (gone for dinner only)	7	15
19. Younger sister-in-law	5	11
20. Restaurant waiter	6	13
21. Cook in friend's home	6	13
22. Ayah, friend's home	6	13
23. Fruit or vegetable seller	6	13
27. Tailor	5	11
28. Bus conductor	8	18
29. Friend, older (informal conversation)	6	14
42. Clerk, book shop	5	11
44. Clerk, post office	5	11

It has also been suggested ¹³ that neutral forms are more impersonal than ranked forms. Category No. 26, God, supports this: although responses are almost evenly distributed among Levels A, B, C, and D, no speaker uses *V-nū* or *V-ne*.

Another way of analyzing impersonal situations is to describe the participants as relating to each other in terms of roles. Impersonal situations tend to involve people as relative strangers, not as solidarities. Categories Nos. 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 27, 28, 42, and 44 represent individuals who would not be solidarities (from the speaker's standpoint).

These criteria point to one of the sources of ambiguity in assigning honorific registers. This is *structurally created* ambiguity, where the intersection of two competing factors complicates the speaker's choice of an honorific. For example, when a person speaks to a friend his own age in the formal setting of the office (No. 30), the factor of solidarity is modified by that of social context. Likewise, the factor of status is modified by impersonality of context (absence of solidarity) when a person speaks to the cook in another person's home. (No. 21). These cases will be discussed further in section 5, below.

¹³ Clark, p. 125, Southworth, p. 70 (with reference to Hindi)

Finally, the used of neutral forms is not distributed evenly among Nepali speakers, but is much more common among some types of speakers than others. Table III, p.9, separates the following groups: Chetri from Kathmandu, Newar¹⁴ and speakers from the Hills or the Terai. This table makes it clear that while the categories listed are ambiguous ones for all speakers, the response to the ambiguity differs from group to group. Chetri tend not to use *V-nū* and *V-ne*. Newar use them occasionally, and speakers whose home is outside the Kathmandu Valley use them most frequently. Thus neutral forms emerge as an optional, dialectally varying response to impersonal situations, situations in which status cues are lacking, or ambiguities of structural origin.

TABLE III: DISTRIBUTION OF HONORIFICS AMONG CHETRI, NEWAR AND SPEAKERS FROM HILL/TERAI

	Register I (A/B)			<i>V-nū</i> and <i>V-ne</i>			Register II (C/D)		
	Chetri	Newar	Hill/ Terai	Chetri	Newar	Hill/ Terai	Chetri	Newar	Hill/ Terai
21. Cook, home of friends	7	4	13	3	5		1	4	6
22. Ayah, home of friends	6	4	9	3	4		2	4	10
23. Fruit or vegetable seller	5	4	13	3	3		3	4	8
27. Tailor	4	3	8	2	4		3	5	12
28. Bus conductor	3	3	7	4	5		3	3	12
29. Friend, older (informal)	5	2	6	3	4		3	4	13

5. THE DIMENSIONS OF THE SYSTEM

A satisfactory account of the Nepali system of honorific registers must be able to predict not only the regularities of the system, but also its structurally created ambiguities—cases in which elements of the system itself operate at cross purposes, as for example when the factors of solidarity and status compete with each other (No. 29, person speaking to an older friend in an informal setting). In order to pre-

¹⁴ There are 11 Newar in the sample, of whom only 2 come from home areas outside the Kathmandu valley. There are 24 Hill/Terai speakers of Nepali, and 8 Chetri. The other four speakers were Brahmin from Kathmandu.

dict. ambiguities of this type, the description must isolate the basic elements of the system and classify them in terms of their relative importance. Those factors which have the greatest value in predicting actual occurrences of honorifics will be termed the basic *dimensions* of the system. The survey data suggest that the following factors are involved in assigning honorifics.

(A) *Social Distance*

For the purposes of this survey, social distance may be analyzed in terms of age status and economic status (i. e. power of employer over servant). The data indicate that registers I and II tend to be exchanged non-reciprocally between the following types of persons: ¹⁵

1. Friends of different ages (Nos. 10, 25, 29 and 39). Friends older than oneself receive Register II; younger friends receive Register I. The choice of register is modified somewhat by the formality or informality of the social setting.

2. Family members of different ages. Elder siblings, parents, and aunts and uncles all receive II; younger siblings and younger nephews and nieces receive I. The situation with in-laws (who possess institutionalized status irregardless of age) is somewhat ambiguous: younger sisters-in-law (No. 19) are addressed predominantly with I, but 5 respondents said they would use II, and 5 said they would use *V-nū* or *V-ne*. Younger brothers-in-law receive both I and II, with I barely predominating.

3. Servants and employers. Servants in one's own home receive I; the survey provides no data about usage by servants toward employers, but recorded conversational data indicates that servants use II toward their employers. If the servant works for someone else than the speaker—for example, the hotel bearer, the cook in a friend's home (Nos. 18 and 21) he sometimes receives II, or a neutral form.

The above three types of usage are usually cited to support a classification of honorifics purely on the basis of verbal respect, with respect being shown to the older or more powerful by the younger or subservient through use of Register II towards them. As far as the data listed above are concerned, this analysis is generally adequate. The use of registers in almost all of the above cases in non-reciprocal, indicating a relationship between non-equals, the distinction between persons receiving I and those receiving II is clearcut. These kinds of non-reciprocal usage

¹⁵ While the usage in actual dyads is reflected rather abstractly in the survey data, the fact of non-reciprocity can be determined by examining the data for matched sets (older/younger friend, older/younger sibling, etc). The conclusions obtained are supported by those obtained from recorded conversational data.

can be treated together as one dimension of the honorific system, termed *social distance*.

(B) *Solidarity*

Social distance cannot account for all of the data in the survey. When matched sets of categories of servants, differing only in one respect — whether the servants works for speakers or another person—are shown to respondents, the respondents say they use a lower grade of honorific for servants employed in their own households than they do toward servants employed by someone else.¹⁶ An additional clue is provided by the example of the hotel bearer. As long as he is an anonymous employee of a hotel in which the speaker does not actually live, he receives a higher level of honorific than he does once the speaker has begun to reside in the hotel semi-permanently and to address the bearer by name.

The term *solidarity*, as defined by Brown,¹⁷ accounts for this phenomenon. Solidarity is the existence of a symmetrical relationship in a dyad, in which both members share something in common, and exchange the same address form reciprocally. While the dyad consists ideally of “power equals”, in practice this dimension applies to everyone, so that one’s superiors and inferiors, as well as one’s peers, may be either solidary or non-solidary. The “old family retainer” is an example of a solidary inferior.

Other things being equal, a lower level of address (Brown’s T, our I) is exchanged between solidarities; a higher (Brown’s V, our II) between non-solidarities. Thus Register I indicates intimacy as well as inferior status.¹⁸ These generalizations hold true when applied to the Nepali data. To be sure, servants tend not to use Register I reciprocally with their employers, but we are talking here not of absolute solidarity, but of relative solidarity. The data suggests that the more effectively solidarity is established, the greater the tendency to use Register I reciprocally in dyads.

Table IV summarizes the data for matched sets of servants. Because the servants, whether solidary or non-solidary, tends to receive I more than II, it is necessary to break the data down into terms of secondary registers. As Brown points out, the dimensions of solidarity and power come into conflicts:¹⁹ a Nepali

¹⁶ In one case the “household” is postulated as being temporarily located in a hotel, where the speaker has established personal rapport with a particular bearer.

¹⁷ Brown, pp. 256–7.

¹⁸ See also Bean, pp. 562–4. Social distance operationally expresses two things: intimacy and deference.

¹⁹ Brown, pp. 257–9.

TABLE IV: DISTRIBUTION OF HONORIFICS: SERVANTS

	Register I (A): <i>gar</i>		Register I (B): <i>gara</i>		Register II (C): <i>garnūhos</i>	
	Solidary	Non-solidary	Solidary	Non-solidary	Solidary	Non-solidary
Cook	8	1	31	29	4	11
Bearer	10	2	32	35	2	3
Ayah	4	—	33	25	3	15
Cleaner	25	11	21	31	—	—

employer may use Level A (*gar*) to his cook of much younger age (accompanied by a brotherly pat on the shoulder)²⁰ but he expects to receive II from the cook. If the cook is very senior, however, and the employer is young, they may exchange II reciprocally.

Some of the data discussed in Section 4, *V-nū* and *V-ne*, yield to analysis in terms of conflict between the dimensions of power and solidarity. When one speaks to an older friend (a solidary who has higher status than oneself) in the informal setting of a picnic, the solidarity aspect is emphasized and comes into conflict with the power aspect (Table I, No. 29). When one speaks to an ayah in someone else's home, her lower socio-economic status is minimized and her non-solidary status is emphasized (No. 22). This points to another function of *V-nū* and *V-ne*, which is to neutralize conflict between separate aspects of the honorific system.

6. SAMPLE SENTENCES

Level A, *gar*: *tyahā bas*, "sit there"; *tarkāri kinna ja*, "go buy vegetables".

Level B, *gara*: *basa na*, "sit down"; *malīā cāu cāu ek plet deū* "give me one order (plate) of chow chow".

V-nū, *garnū*: *hos garnū*, "be careful"; *kothāmā phlit charnū* "spray the room with Flit".

V-ne, *garne*: *cārjanālāi kaphī lyāune* "bring coffee for four people".

Level C, *garnūhos*: *basnūhos na !* "please sit down"; *malāi tyo kitāp dinūhos*, "please give me that book".

Level D, *garibaksios*: *la ! basibaksios, hajur* "well, please be seated sir".
malāi tyo kitāp baksios, "please give me that book".

²⁰ Personal observation.

SUPPLEMENT I: RECOMMENDED USAGE FOR FOREIGNERS

(Total—46)

	A tā gar	B timi gara	V-nū garnū	V-ne garne	C tapāl garnū- hos	D hajur gari. baksios
1. Animals	42	2				
2. Servant who does cleaning in one's home	5	32	2	2	5	
3. Friend own age (informal conversation)	3	23		3	14	
4. Dhobi	3	32	1		8	
5. Porter	4	36	1		4	
6. Cows	11	32				
7. 2-3 year old brother or sister		-not asked-				
8. Younger brother		-not asked-				
9. Younger sister		-not asked-				
10. Friend, younger (informal conversation)	2	33	2	1	7	
11. Rickshaw puller	2	29	1		4	
12. Servant who cleans hotel room	11	36	3		5	
13. Bearer in hotel where you are living	2	34	2	1	7	
14. Chaukidar	2	31	3	1	9	
15. Cook in one's own home	1	29	2		12	
16. Children's ayah (one's own home)	1	29	5		11	
17. Younger nephews and nieces		-not asked-				
18. Hotel bearer (gone for dinner only)	1	24	5	1	15	
19. Younger sister-in-law						
20. Restaurant waiter		24	4	1	17	
21. Cook in friend's home		25	3	1	17	
22. Children's ayah (friends' home)		17	7	1	20	
23. Fruit or vegetable seller		10	3	2	30	
24. Younger brother-in-law		-not asked-				
25. Friend, younger (during work)		20	3	3	19	
26. God	7	10			19	8

	A	B	V-nū	V-ne	C	D
	tā	timī			tapāl	hajur
	gar	hara	garnū	garne	garnū-	gari.
					hos	baksios
27. Tailor		9	4	2	31	
28. Bus conductor	1	8	3	2	32	
29. Friend, older (informal conversation)	1	13		2	28	
30. Friend own age (during work)	1	10	2		27	1
31. Elder brother-in-law		-not asked-				
32. Father's sister		-not asked-				
33. Mother's sister		-not asked-				
34. Parents		-not asked-				
25. Elder sister		-not asked-				
36. Elder brother		-not asked-				
37. Father's brother		-not asked-				
38. Mother's brother		-not asked-				
39. Friend, older (during work)		4	2	1	38	
40. Policeman		2	2	2	40	
41. Elder sister-in-law		-not asked-				
42. Clerk, book shop			5		41	
43. Proprietor, cloth shop		1	3	1	41	
44. Clerk, post office		1	3		42	
45. Clerk, bank			2	1	43	
46. Proprietor, book shop			2	1	43	
47. Proprietor, medical hall		1	2	1	42	
48. Officer at check post, Tribhuvan Rajpath		1	1		44	
49. Girl who makes ticket bookings, RNAC			2		44	
50. Teacher or professor		1		1	44	

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