

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF NEPALESE POLITICS

During the 18th Century, as the Mughal empire in India collapsed, a mighty Hindu Kingdom emerged to its north, the kingdom of Nepal. At the peak of its power Nepal Spread from almost the border of the present day Himachal Pradesh in the west to the Tista river in the east.

The country and its people

Nepal extends 885 km east west between 80°E and 88°E longitude North to South. However its spread is from 145 km to 241 km between 26°N and 30°N latitude.¹ The total area of Nepal is $147,181\text{ Km}^2$. The nearest sea port from Nepal is Calcutta, 960 Km away.² Nepal is mostly mountaneous. More than 25% of the land surface is about 3000 m and 20% is lower than 300m high.³

North to South, Nepal is divided into three physical

1. Majupuria, T.C. and Indra, Majupuria, The Complete Guide to Nepal, p.7.
2. Ibid., p.9 and see Gurung, Dr. Harka, "Geographic Setting" in Nepal, A Profile, p.4.
3. Ibid.

divisions:

- 1) Lowland including Terai, Bhabhar, Cheria and Mahabharat upto 915 m.
- 2) Midland including the Mahabharat range between 916m and 2745m.
- 3) The highland region above that.

Traditionally, 'Nepal' refers to the middle range which includes the Kathmandu valley.⁴

Terai is 25 to 32 Km wide and it covers about 17% of the total land area. It forms the northern part of the Indo-Gangetic basin and is fertile with alluvial soil. Terai produces 60% of the total grain output of Nepal and it is also rich in evergreen forests,⁵ Terai is also the home of major industries of Nepal.⁶

From east to west the territory of Nepal is divided into three major river basins, all formed by three trans Himalayan rivers - the Kosi, the Kali and the Karnali. The Kosi drainage basin in the eastern Nepal is made up of narrow bridges and deep valleys. It receives heavy rainfall

4. Majupurias, op.cit., p.9.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

and is the home of large Mongoloid groups of tribal people.

The Karnali basin of western Nepal is a dry tract of extensive high lands. Majority of the population of this tract is caucasoid, the only tribal group being the plains Tharus.

The central basin is formed by the Kali or the Gandaki rivers. It forms the transitional zone both in physical and in cultural terms. This zone is most developed and urbanised. The major urban centres in this zone are Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon. The high intermont vallies found in the north of central and western Nepal are inhabited by the Bhot people.⁷

One major consequence of the lay-out of the Himalayan ranges is that roads, like rivers, can go only north-south. There is no east-west lateral road on the Himalayas. This generates certain peculiar results. In the first place, no direct physical communication between the east and west is possible. In order to move east or west one has to come down to the plains and travel through foreign territories.

The topography of Nepal has divided the Nepalese

7. Nepal, A Profile, p.10.

population into different islands, Economically, Terai is most prosperous as it grows and exports rice, maize, jute, sugarcane, oilseeds and various other tropical crops. The mid-range of Nepal grows paddy, maize, millet and barley at a subsistence level. The Bhot region which is snow-clad during the major part of the year has short seasons to grow barley, buckwheat and potato. It is a food-deficit area and the people depend on trade and trans-humance as well as on agriculture.

Population

The total population of Nepal in 1980 was over 15 million with an annual growth rate of 2.6%. However, Terai has been generally less populated than the hills. It was only in 1960, that a governmental drive was made for human settlement in Terai region, In 1980, the mountains and the hills contained 83% of Nepal's population while Terai contained only 17%⁸. The ^Ypop_Nulation of land and population of Terai (17:17) hides the fact that the several parts of the hills and the mountains do not have any human settlement at all. About 52% of the total population of Nepal lived in the midland which is quite densely populated.⁹ Further, the

8. Majupurias, op.cit., pp.29-30, and Gurung, op.cit., p.9.

9. Gurung, op.cit., p.9.

eastern half of the country supports three quarters of the population.¹⁰ The 218 sqm Kathmandu valley which occupies a mere 0.4% of the total area accounts for 5% of the total population. The Kathmandu Valley, in 1960, had a density of 2,000 persons per square mile with Kathmandu city having 50,000 persons per square mile.¹¹

Nepal's rugged geography has given her considerable ethno-cultural diversity. While the Terai and middle range show predominantly Indian features, in the northern hills there is a distinct presence of Tibeto-Mongoloid population. In the eastern part the Kiratis have affiliations with the Indo-Tibetan population of the eastern Himalayas.¹² There are about 36 dialects in the country. Though 24 such dialects belong to the Tibeto-Burman group, the (12) Indo-Aryan dialect speakers far out number the Tibeto-Burman speakers. The Nepali language today is essentially a standardised form of the Indo-Aryan dialects.¹³

10. Ibid.

11. Majupuria\$, op.cit., p.9-10. Gurrang, op.cit., p.9.

12. Majupuria\$, op.cit., p.7., Sharan, Dr. P, Government and Politics in Nepal, p.3.

13. Gurung, op.cit., p.8. 'The Nepali language as it stands today has assimilated the distorted forms of Sanskrit and Prakrit as well as [is] a product of the Aryan Mangolian culture. Not only the words of these languages are found in Nepali but also their verbs. Words derived from these languages have been remoulded into Nepali forms

The religious distribution of the population of Nepal shows the predominance of Hinduism and, in 1962, the king of Nepal declared Nepal as a Hindu state. Buddhism came to Nepal probably during Asoka's time (Though Gotama, the Buddha, was born at Kapilavastu, in the Terai, he preached in northern India, not in the Nepal hills¹⁴). Among the Newars of the Western mid-range there is a division between Hindus and Buddhists¹⁵. In the northern hills the Tibetan mixture of Bon and Buddhism exists. There is also a small muslim population in Nepal, mostly concentrated in the Terai.¹⁶ There is no communal conflict in Nepal.

The Traditional Political Economy of Nepal

An economically diverse country like Nepal must necessarily be dependent on trade of which there is a long tradition. In fact Nepal's economic importance clearly depends upon roads and Indo-Tibetan trade. This trade is -----
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and are used in accordance with the rules of the grammar' 'A Brief Introduction to Nepalese Literature' in Nepal : A Profile, p.91).

14. Sharan, op.cit., pp.3-4.

15. Ibid.

16. There are, however, legends of the visit of either Gotama or Ananda, his disciple, to the Valley, See Sanwal, Social and Political History of Nepal, p.108.

facilitated by the existence of two factors:- (I) Convenient mountain passes between the Nepal and Tibet, and (II) the practice of transthumance and periodic migration of Nepalese population.

The trade, traditionally, took the following forms. In winter the Bhotias would come down with their herds of animals and merchandise to the mid-range and the mid-range Nepalese would move down to the Terai markets to extend the same trade and vice-versa.

Yet, much of this trade was carried out through barter and gold, though there are archaeological evidences to suggest that Nepal minted coins for Tibet. There was no monetisation of the Nepalese economy as there was very little surplus production in it.

90% of the Nepalese population live on agriculture which contributes about 62% of the gross domestic product. According to an official estimate of 1970 the contribution of agriculture to the national economy was 23%, of business 2.5%, of industrial labour 1%, of cottage industry 1% and of services 2%, 95% of the population lived in 23,446 rural

villages.¹⁷

Until 1951, the annual revenue of the Nepal Government was to the tune of 1,500,000. Of this 90% was kept by the Rana rulers themselves and the other 10% was spent for army and Governmental information agents.¹⁸ As agriculture was severely under-taxed,¹⁹ the importance of "services" in the revenue rose. Such "services" of course mainly meant the soldiers allowed to be hired by the British and the Indian Government.

According to Mahesh Regmi the tax-base of the Government of Nepal was narrowed by the prevalence of tax-free grants of land to the aristocracy and the bureaucracy under the Birta and the Jagir System. There were basically two aspects of the traditional land tenure system of the hill region of Nepal. The first aspect was the dominance of the aristocracy and the bureaucracy over land and peasants. Before 1951, the bulk of the cultivated area in the hill region had been granted under the Birta and Jagir tenure. The peasants were compelled to pay to the birta owner or

17. Mishra, D.K. and Mahesh Acharya, 'Resource Mobilization in Nepal' in S.K. Srivastava (ed.), Modernization in Nepal, Centre for the Study of Nepal, Banaras Hindu University, 1985, p.153.

18. A Dictionary of Politics, Penguin, p.242, 1957.

19. Misra and Acharya, op.cit., p.153.

Jagirdar in money and commodities at a level which took away at least half of their produces. Such payments were in addition to personal servitude of different categories.²⁰

Such a condition would be described as semi-serfdom. But there was a second kind of exploitation in the traditional agrarian system in the hill region. Below the superior rights of the Birta owners or Jagirdars or of the state, there were landlords who had achieved their position through the inter-play of economic forces within the statutory tenure structure. Particularly important was the role of the money lenders.²¹

The Akhil Nepal Kisan Sangh Manifesto of 1950 highlights this social oppression of the bulk of the Nepalese:-

"In our country the peasants are in majority but they have not their own land to till. Almost all land is in the hands of big Ranas, big birtawals, zamindars, jimmewals and other big feudal lords who donot work in a land even for a day. The real peasants, the tillers of the land, are forced

20. Regmi, Mahesh, C., "Modernizing Peasant Society :- Recent Trends in the Hill Region in Nepal" in Chaube, S.K. (edited), The Himalayas, p.130.
Birta = Bharta = Maintenance; Jagir = Fief.

21. Ibid.

to work as the slave ploughmen or crop-sharers and to hand over major portions of the products of their labour to the owners of the land At last ... they are forced to go to their own plunderers and borrow money at interest of 50-100%. This debt like the web entangles them from all sides, and from generation to generation they are not able to free themselves from this. This is the condition of land less peasants.

“The small and middle peasants have certainly some land but it is not enough for maintenance of their family. They also, in order to save their children from starvation, are forced to go to money lenders. The burden of debt has broken their backbone and they, too, are overhead and ear in debt. Land is passing out of their hand; they, too, are becoming landless peasants.....

“In brief, historical economic conditions have divided the rural population of Nepal into two mutually opposing camps. On one side, there is 5% of population. This includes big Ranas, big Birtawals, big feudal lords, Zamindars jimmiwals and moneylenders - enemies of the country and the people. On ^{the} other hand is 95% of the population. This includes landless peasants, poor peasants,

middle peasants and rich peasants."²²

It is in this context of a fragmented society and depressed political economy that the story of democratic movement in Nepal unfolds itself.

22. Manifesto of All Nepal Kisan Sangh, 1950, C.P.1, Archives, Calcutta.