THE NEWARS
An Ethno-Sociological Study of a Himalayan Community

By
Gopal Singh Nepali
M.A., Ph.D.
Dedicated

to

Dr. G. S. GHURYE
The Newars
Illustrations:

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This note goes back to 1958 when Dr Gopal Singh Nepali was finalizing this work at the Bombay University for his PhD degree. I was then a junior PhD aspirant sitting near him. And at some point of time he began to give me chapters of his thesis for perusal and suggestions, and I must admit that I benefited more than him.

At the final stage when he met his PhD guide Dr G.S. Ghurye, once a week, he often shared with us the points that the great scholar gave him. Once, while reading out a chapter in which there was a reference to a certain Newar food item, a meat-delicacy, painstakingly processed and seasoned for a period of time, Ghurye interrupted:

‘Do you know what this shows?...’

Gopal Singh sat stunned; he did not expect that query. Ghurye then came out, in his old-time professorial tenor:

‘...High proteins!...this is very high protein food ... it shows that every human group -- whatever the environment -- finds out a way for high protein support....’

When Gopal Singh narrated this to us, we became richer by one more piece of sociological vision (more so in my case because my PhD guide was Dr KM Kapadia, an early pupil of Ghurye).

The Newar study was among projects close to Ghurye’s heart as it fulfilled his dream of getting at least one substantial field study from the sub-Himalayan region.

When the title of the study was to be finalized, Ghurye suggested the sub-
title ‘an ethno-sociological study’. That was how Ghurye had shaped it with his suggestions. Later, I realized how Ghurye showed the way to bring in a sociological base to studies in related genres. Such gems of advice we received often.

Till his MA degree (Bombay Univ), he had been working in a good bank job which gave him permission to attend classes. After MA, Ghurye, realizing Gopal Singh’s interest in academics, advised him to give up his job and work on a thesis. He was given a fellowship, though a lean one, but he was happy.

After PhD, Gopal Singh lectured in sociology for a period at the JJ School of Architecture, Bombay. (Earlier too a pupil of Ghurye had taught sociology for a paper at the JJ School.) He then got an assignment at Gorakhpur University, followed by a long tenure (1963-86) as a Professor at the Banaras Hindu University. After Banaras, he was at North Bengal University, Siliguri, near Darjeeling, but moved on after a short time, to Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal, where, amidst his role as a professor, he was working on a monograph on the Manandhars of that region. He was at Tribhuvan for eight years or so.

Soon after his PhD, he found a Bombay publisher, the very enlightened GS Pohekar for this work, and it became my responsibility — in Gopal Singh’s periodic absence — to edit the work to a reasonable size and see it through the printing stage.

Though the editorial processing was quite a strenuous job in the midst of my own PhD work and other responsibilities (like working somewhere to support myself), the insight that it gave me on the study of a culture — in this case, of the Newars — became part of my academic psyche. Gopal Singh’s work is a complete study covering almost all aspects of the Newars, since long a benchmark for studies in that region. Before he
passed away on 20 Jan 2002 in Bombay -- which was his home from his first year of college till his last day -- he had told me more than once that he wanted to write an addenda chapter with data from his re-visits to Kathmandu. But that did not happen. I am also not sure what happened to his study of the Manandhars.

Any time we met, after a few minutes he would often get into some discussion on an anthropo-sociological topic. He was very unassuming and affectionate.

It has been a very pleasant task to walk down memory grooves of those days to write this short note. It takes me back to the large ‘research hall’ of the Bombay University’s post-graduate wing (as it existed then). We were all engaged in PhD work at different levels of progress. There were also doctoral students from other disciplines in the same big room — in economics, political science and history, besides sociology. This made our network somewhat ‘inter-disciplinary’. Krishna Chandavarkar, JV Naik, Matalik Desai, and Lalit Deshpande are some of the names that I recall from other disciplines.

We were - and are - proud that revered names like VKRV Rao, MN Srinivas, MSA Rao, IP Desai and YB Damle were once students of our alma mater. Well-known economists ML Dantwala, DT Lakdawala and PR Brahmanand had their chambers near our big room. Besides Ghurye and Kapadia, AR Desai, known for his strong Marxist leanings, was among our teachers -- what a stimulating atmosphere! This is where The Newars and similar other works took shape.

‘We’ – including Aban Mehta, C. Rajagopalan, K.L. Mythili, Rajani Pathare, Mohammad Mohsin, Mabel Fonseca, Kunj Patel, and Kunj Bihari Singh – had memorable days in the university. In two-s or three-s ‘we’ would go to the university gardens down below our floor to get tea from the University Press workers’ canteen.

The canteen was very close to the University’s iconic
Convocation Hall with its arresting Gothic façade and painted glass panels. Besides convocation ceremonies, many lecture events were held there. This is where we heard the untiring social activist Jai Prakash Narayan, statesman and rigid Gandhian Morarji Desai, historian Arnold Toynbee, famous for his multi-volume Studies in History; Sir Mortimer Wheeler, known for his milestone Mohanjo-daro excavations; European writer Arthur Koestler, author of Darkness at Noon and some other works; and veteran sociologist Robert Merton.

Gopal Singh, Mohsin and me tried not to miss any of these events.

A few feet away from the Convocation Hall stands Bombay’s logo, the Venetian-Gothic Rajabai Clock Tower, the first sky-scraper of Bombay, 280 feet high with seven floors, built by Premchand Roychand, founder of the Bombay Stock Exchange, in the name of his mother.

Next to the Tower is the great University Library, another awesome structure that complements the classicism of the Convocation Hall and the Tower.

Little did we then realize that we were sipping tea, discussing Evans-Pritchard or Srinivas or the American Journal of Sociology; writing our theses, and fine-tuning our manuscripts at a site that later became part of high-grade world heritage.

Going through these sepia leaves has been possible because Gopal Singh’s wife, the very affectionate Mrs Lajja-behn, based in the Powai suburb of Bombay/Mumbai, their son Sanjeev Singh (in the US) and daughter Sangeeta Charan (in Singapore) requested me to write a note for this third print — the second reprint-issue — by Mandala Book Point, Kathmandu.

I am thankful to all of them.

Mumbai, 16 Aug 2013
S. D. Pillai
Preface

The Newars had attracted my attention as early as the days when I was a student of M.A. They are a distinct community in the cis-Himalayan region with a high degree of material culture and a complex social organization, which set them apart from others.

However, very little has been studied in the past about these people. In the 19th century some European scholars like Brian Hodgson, H. A. Oaldfield, Col. W. Kirkpatrick and a few others had collected a good deal of data on them, but there is still a dearth of literature on the subject. Moreover, these writers were not trained anthropologists or sociologists. Perhaps the only work that can be said to be of some sociological value is the paper by Professor K. P. Chattopadhyaya, entitled History of the Newar Culture (JRASB, vol. IXX, 1923). But this is, however, a collation of facts available from published literature. Professor Chattopadhyaya himself had then felt the need for a detailed monograph on the Newars based on actual field work. The present work which is the outcome of a field investigation that I carried out in the Valley of Kathmandu in 1957-58, I believe, fulfils that need in a small way.

Originally, the material as presented here was collected for the preparation of my Ph.D. thesis, submitted to the University of Bombay in 1959, under the guidance of Dr. G. S. Ghurye, now Emeritus Professor of Sociology. The material as it stood in the thesis-form had to be cut down to the requirements of publication.

During field work, I became a participant-observer.
without ignoring the other techniques of gathering data, whenever I could profit by them. Though the Valley of Kathmandu as a whole was my field, I concentrated particularly on the town of Kathmandu and the village of Panga for an intensive study of urban and rural differences. Three hundred families were sampled from these two areas for a detailed study of marriage and the family among the Newars. Furthermore, to find out the regional variations in Newar socio-cultural life, field observations were made in Tarai and the hills with an eye on the process of interaction between the Newars and the ethnic groups among whom they live.

Of late many Western scholars have been attracted by Nepal. And this is a happy augury for the study of the Himalayan peoples, the understanding of whose cultures has become significant politically as well. The results of some of these investigations, which cover the Newars also, have been published subsequent to the period of my field work. I have as far as possible attempted to refer to them so as to make due note of such facts as I had overlooked during my field work.

Readers' attention may be drawn to the restricted use I have made of the terms Gorkha and Parbate. The first term has passed on in common military parlance as referring to those ethnic groups from which soldiers are recruited, while the term Parbate is commonly taken to denote those who are hill-born. In contrast to such usages, I have used these terms alternately to designate as a whole the speakers of the Nepali language who include the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. This manner of usage is quite consistent with what the Nepalese take these terms to stand for.

I owe an immense debt to many organizations, institutions and individuals, who have made this work possible. Especially, I thank the University of Bombay for giving me a Research Fellowship for this study.
To my esteemed teacher, Dr. G. S. Ghurye, now Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Bombay, I owe the deepest gratitude for his valuable guidance without which this study would not have taken its present shape. As a humble token of my sense of gratitude, I have dedicated this book to him.

I would also like to record my thankfulness to Dr. K. M. Kapadia, Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology, University of Bombay, for the constant encouragement I have been receiving from him all these years.

Special thanks are due to Messrs. Purandas Shrestha, Ratandas Shrestha, the late Govinddas Shrestha, Viswanath Prasad Agarwal (of Messrs Ganpatrai Hanuman Prasad Firm), Poet Chitradhar, Thakurlal Manandhar, Kedar Bhakta Shrestha, Hari Bhagat Shrestha (of Panga village) and many other Newar friends who have helped me in a variety of ways.

Mr. S. Devadas Pillai, my friend and former research colleague, who has gone through almost the entire manuscript and the galleys and made valuable suggestions, especially in the second half of the book, has high appreciation from me.

My friend, Mr. L. A. Mehta, has helped me in many ways during my studentship and it is my pleasant duty to thank him.

This note of acknowledgements would be far more incomplete without a word of thanks to my enlightened publisher, Mr. G. S. Pohekar, who has always shown more than casual interest in the publication of this book.

Banaras Hindu University,
Varanasi,
October, 1964. **Gopal Singh Nepali**