

Women in Nepal

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Background

Nepal is a Hindu kingdom where one finds as many temples of Goddesses as those of Gods, if not more, thus providing an encouraging background for a subject such as "womanhood".

As we proceed, we will see how much of this apparent glorified womanhood, in the form of various Goddesses, has actually influenced the status of homosapien females in the Neplese society.

Nepal is ruled by a king who, as tradition goes, is looked upon by 11.3 million people, as the reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, thus, on religious grounds, being entitled to marry two wives simultaneously as Lord Vishnu did. However, this practice was abandoned by King Mahendra and the present ruler, King Birendra is practicing likewise.

The country's geophysical situation in lying between two large countries, i.e. China in the north, and India in the south, east and west, means that Nepal is a land-locked country with no access to the sea. The high Himalayan mountains in the north, and the dense malaria infested forests in the south, served as a natural barrier to and from the outside world until as recently as 1950.

Historically, today's Nepal was divided into many small kingdoms until 1769 when the Gorkha King Prithivinarayan Shah united these small kingdoms into one stronger nation. This in fact saved Nepal and its people from becoming a part of the British colony, inspite of four military wars held between Nepal and the British Empire which eventually

ended in the year 1816 in the form of the "Sugauli Treaty". This left Nepal and the Nepalese people as independent as ever, but definitely poorer.

Racially, the people of Nepal are primarily of Aryan and Mongoloid origin. The social and cultural norms practiced are based on the Hindu as well as the Buddhist faiths.

At the present time, 11% of the population are literate in which the female literacy rate is about 1%. Since the country's economy is predominantly agriculture, the women labor force contributes equally if not more to the agricultural industry.

The 104 year-period of the autocratic rule by the Rana family was the darkest period in the history of Nepal. Apart from depriving the people from their basic human rights, it had also legally denied education to the female populace and had classified women as an inferior citizen legally as well as socially. The impact of which is what Nepal is facing today as being one of the 25 poorest nations in the world. Yet, ironically, it was no-one but a female who blindly exercising the power of her husband, the King, led to the "Kot Massacre", out of which emerged one family autocratic rule for Nepal and exile for the Queen herself.

In 1950, people of Nepal, under the leadership of His Majesty King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev, overthrew this autocratic regime and opened the country to the modern world with new hope and aspiration. It was after the 1950 revolution that the women were accorded full freedom to participate in education, social and political activities.

However, these can be viewed as only a few prerequisites for transforming Nepalese women into meeting the needs of developing Nepal.

Socio-religious Status

The women, as part of the total population of Nepal, can be divided into three cultural groups in accordance with the three distinct geographical belts of the country: the lowland, or Tarai of the south; the middle, or Mahabharat belt, and the high Himalayas in the north. The social and cultural practices observed by the people in the Tarai is similar to that of North India and there is greater mobility in this part of the country. Marriages are usually exogamous. In earlier days the male child's marriage to a biologically matured woman, used to be the common practice in some of the communities in the Tarai. There are still many heart-breaking folk songs in "Maithali" (one of the dialects) conveying the dilemma of a mature lady married to a younger husband. It is in this area that an aborigine tribe, called "Tharus", live. (Among the Rana Tharus, the wives, like /all other wives, cook for the family and the husband. However, while serving the food she pushes the food plate to her husband with her toes instead of using her hands respectfully. This is, I was told, to remind him of his inferior status, perhaps for his lack of knowledge in the art of cooking.) Needless to say, a Tharu woman is as much a breadwinner as her husband through her active and skillful participation in the family farms.

The religion in the Tarai is predominantly Hindu except for a small pocket of Muslims.

The people living in the Mahabharat belt are locally called

"Perbaté", who, as described by G.R. Berrman, "share common origins, history, context and environment and who interact with one another more than with outsiders". But yet we encounter various ethnic groups such as Rai, Limbu, Mager and Gurungs, etc., who have displayed outstanding interaction with the outside world in the form of reputable Gorka soldiers in the British army. There are Ksatriyas and Brahamans as well in this region. Here also, the religious faith practiced is Hinduism.

Although the Hindu religion emphasizes monogamy as the ideal type of marriage, polygamy and polyandry, until recently, used to be a common form of marriage /in this belt. In the case of the Tamang community, out-of-wedlock pregnancy does not socially outcast the girl. Premarital sexual relations among the young boys and girls is socially accepted, and does not have any bearing upon their future marriages. The baby of such a relationship is usually taken away by the father after the weaning and the mother can then marry anyone she likes. It is in this region of Nepal that a wife can easily be abducted by a man, who however, has to pay financial compensation to her ex-husband.

One of the important communities living in Mababharat belt, especially in Kathmandu, is Newar. The female from Newar can never be a widow because she is primarily married with a fruit called "Belā" at a young age. As long as she does not lose this fruit "Belā", she is not to become a widow inspite of the demise of her man-husband, who is usually considered less important. Therefore, a Newar widow does not have to suffer as much as a Brahamin and Ksatriyas widow. She can remarry, which is socially acceptable, as against the practice in

Brahaman and Ksitriya communities. It is this Newar community which today still performs the religious rituals of selecting a female child as "Kumari" who is popularly known as a "Living Goddess" among the tourists.

In the high Himalayan regions, the people live in a closely knit and socially homogenous settlement. Marriages are usually intra-village with very few being between different localities. It is quite common for the marriages to occur among the first cousins. Polyandry was prevalent. Two or more Sherpa brothers may share a common wife. A similar example is found in Mahabharat, the great Hindu mythology book, where five brothers shared one wife, "Draupadi". Sheep farming, salt trade, and portorage are the main occupations among these people. Their social and cultural practices are more akin to the Tibetan culture and they speak a variety of dialects similar to the Tibetean language. They are of the Buddhist faith.

To further illustrate the status of women in the religious framework I am presenting here a little legendary tale. According to this legend, the real strength of King Jayaprakash Malla, the ruler of the Kathmandu Valley prior to the conquest by the Gorkha King Prithivinarayan Shah, was the blessings of the Goddess "Taleju Bhawani". One day, King Jayaprakash Malla, during his usual friendly audience with the Goddess, made an ill attempt to seduce her and consequently the Goddess inflicted a curse upon him leading to the downfall of the Malla Dynasty. The beautiful Temple of the Goddess Taleju Bhawani still stands impressively in Kathmandu as a constant reminder that the women's status in being the real power "Shakti" within the God, vis-a-vis the man, and not merely a sex object.

In the 6th century B.C., after years of research into the Hindu religion, Buddha extracted the core socio-religious formula which could bring freedom to any individual regardless of one's sex or social class, thus freeing so many human souls then terrorized by the orthodox Hindu rituals which were heavily based on the class system. Buddha is regarded in the Hindu religion as the 9th incarnation of God and the Buddhist philosophy in Nepal is adopted as an extension of true Hinduism and recognizes the female as being equal to the male.

What we have observed from this discussion so far is that due attention has been given to the female sex in formulating the basic socio-religious rules for this society. However, we have also observed that in the process of evolution, some individuals in pursuit of their personal lust and power, have been twisting the basic codes. One of the outcomes of such manoeuvring is the categorization of women as one of the properties of man. In the feudal Rana regime, man's socio-economic status was directly related to the number of horses, cows, servants and wives he possessed.

Take the example of Ramayan, the great book of Hindu mythology, which has been the source of all the socio-religious codes of the Hindu religion from the time immorial. Sita and Rama are the two main characters described in this book as the ideal examples of Hindu woman and man.

Learned men, especially priests, cited "Sita's" virtues in being a dutiful, loving and loyal wife as an example to the young girls. But they deliberately forgot to tell us about the oppressed "Sita" who while pregnant, was exiled by Rama in the pursuit of his political career in becoming the ideal King. Sita then independently raised her two twin sons

into skillful warriors who eventually defeated Rama's warriors and Sita refused to go back to Rama afterwards inspite of his repeated pleas. Thus, from Sita we do not only learn to be a dutiful and loving wife, but also a brave, independent and justful woman with plenty of self respect. But in the existing darkness of mass illiteracy, how many women in Nepal can have access to the true story of Sita and Rama of the Hindu mythology which considers a wife to be as equal and as strong as a man and the two are compared with the two wheels of a chariot.

Political Status

Since 1950, every modern Neplese man and woman is struggling very hard to free themselves from the cobwebs of some of these orthodox social rituals. The Late King Mahendra was the champion of this cause. In 1961, while introducing the Panchayat democratic institution, he provided women with a constitutional right to form a woman's organization, which is one of the five political class organizations, and it has three of its representatives in the National Panchayat or Legislature. Anyone of these representatives can go up to the top of the political ladder, (Prime Minister) depending upon their abilities and talents. At the present time, one of the representatives of the women's organization is holding the portfolio of the Health Ministry as an Assistant Minister. Apart from this, any woman has the freedom to run for a public office from any general constituency and enjoy the same political status as men. One example of that is the Honourable Sushila Thapa who has twice defeated the male candidate in her constituency and today is an active legislator

in being the President of the Committee of National Panchayat on Foreign Affairs, Education, Health and Broadcasting and Publicity. This is the same woman who was once punished by the Rama feudal system for initiating a girls school in her village.

I am professionally indebted to her for her keen interest in matters relating to mother and child health, such as family planning and prevention of high maternal mortality and morbidity due to prevalent illegal abortions.

Similarly, today's President of the Nepal Woman's Organization, Honourable Punyaprava Dhungana, who was also a victim of the feudal social norms in finding herself married at the age of 11 and in being denied education. However, it is after 1950, at the age of 30, that she earned for herself the education up to Bachelor of Arts.

Nepal Women's Organization, through its networks reaching as far as some 3,500 villages, seeks to revive the sense of self-reliance in every woman as the first step towards achieving liberation and development. Self-reliance comes only when one learns how to stand upon one's own feet financially, socially and politically. But the achievement of self-reliance becomes all the more difficult in the prevailing context of mass illiteracy. It is with this view that the Nepal Woman's Organization is now marching ahead with a program called, "Women's Literacy and Fundamental Education Campaign", the main objective of which is to impart knowledge of literacy, citizenship, duties of the organization, legal rights of women, first aid and family planning, to the rural women. The training is organized on the premises of village primary schools and run by the primary committee of the organization at the village level.

His Majesty's Government provides local as well as national support to such activities. Teachers are drawn from the community on a voluntary basis.

Apart from this campaign, the organization also provides vocational training in sewing and knitting to rural women by arranging a three-month long workshop in their villages.

The Organization also runs a permanent program known as "The Intensive Program" where two local women workers organize a working unit of five villages and teach the local women handicrafts, poultry farming and kitchen gardening.

From 1965 to date, the Nepal Women's Organization has enabled 5,042 women to become literate, 270 women to become adult teachers, 4,000 women received vocational training, and is currently training 500 women in an experimental intensive program.

In quantitative terms, these figures still do not appear impressive. However, it is the dedicated theme and mode of its operations which do provide a ripple of hope for further transformation.

For example, in a situation where the entire female populace has learned for centuries to accept the sufferings of annual unwanted pregnancies as the unavoidable fate of being born a woman, no organization can dispel this psychological block overnight. However, the organization is heading in the right direction and in so doing needs support from larger numbers of friends - national as well as international. Assistance from International Women's Organizations in supporting this Literacy Campaign has been highly appreciated by the women of Nepal.

One encouraging social transformation which is visible now is that the professional education has become one of the most sought-after virtues in a prospective bride, even by the mother-in-law and this, in the 1950's, used to be viewed as a threat to her matrimonial career. The reasons for this are both economic and social. Economically, it means an increase in family income, while socially it allows the elder members of the family to remain useful by engaging them in child-care and household management.

Legal Status

As for the legal rights of Neplese women, the revised "Mulki Ain", (Law of the Realm) as introduced by the Late King Mahendra in 1964, has allowed women to seek a divorce in certain specified conditions: these conditions are common to both sexes. Children go to the father and the woman can then remarry. Men and women, without any discrimination, have the right to equal pay for equal work. Women, after 14 years of age, and men after 18 years of age, have the right to marry and form a family without any limitations due to race, nationality or religion. However, Neplese law prohibits conversion of a Hindu wife or husband to any other religion, even under the cover of marriage.

Women do not have a legal claim upon paternal wealth except for the voluntary dowry during her marriage. Wives are given full independence on their wealth as accumulated either by their own earnings or by their dowry. This is not included in the common pool of paternal wealth, thus escaping any legal claim of any legal heirs of the paternal property. The wife is legally entitled to an equal share of her husband's wealth, so long as she remains his wife. Regardless of the wife's financial status, the husband is the legal provider of her subsistence. A daughter remaining unmarried until the age of 35, has

some legal claim upon the paternal property until the time she remains unmarried. A divorced woman has no legal claim upon the paternal wealth as well as upon the husband's wealth. However, the husband is required to provide financial support to his separated spouse.

A childless couple can adopt sons as their legal heirs but they cannot adopt daughters in the same legal status. These kinds of legal discriminations among male and female children obviously emphasizes the higher place of a male child within the family. The female child is made aware of her inferiority for being born a female who does not even legally qualify for adoption. Yet, the family planning workers are sent to these families to tell the parents to stop having babies after producing 2 or 3, regardless of their children's sex. Besides, family planning workers, in pursuit of a 2-child family, also have to struggle through the prevailing belief that the sons only can guarantee parent's entry into heaven upon their death.

The legal provision, in the revised "Mulki Ain" (Law of the Realm) of requiring to pay "Jari" (financial compensation) to the ex-husband of the abducted wife by the abductor, suggests women's status as being man's property. This provision has also been abused by many men for business purposes.

Politically, Nepalese women have the right to vote, the right to run for any public office, and the right to have equal opportunities in jobs in the private sector, as well as in the public sector. However, I believe that the lesson of equality and freedom should start at home right from the minute the child is born without postponing it until she reaches the voting age. The task is not easy, especially in the prevailing socio-religious values as imposed by some articulated men in the name of religion. Legal support to such values and practices will make it only

more difficult to bring changes thus delaying the socio-economic development of the family and the country.

The son is regarded as a natural social security for aging parents, while it is considered a sinful act to subsist upon a daughter's income. It is this basic socio-religious value that needs to be challenged first in order to start the long march in making a daughter's birth as joyful an event as that of a son's. Legal measures in making the daughters as equal heirs to the parental property, could be viewed as one of the treatments for reversing such value. This would also provide some competition to the sons in providing social security to parents and as competition being invariably beneficial to the consumers, this could benefit the aging parents. Another very important effect of such legal provision will be on the fertility because it would then remove the "Pension Plan" logic for desiring two or more sons which, in demographic terms, means a family of 4 children.

Status at the Family Level

A bride is escorted by her husband, usually accompanied by a procession of friends and relatives. The parents of the bride give their daughter's hand in marriage to the bridegroom saying, "Maré Pap, Palé Punyā"; the literal translation of which is, "destroying her will be a sin whereas preserving her will be a pious act". From this point on, it usually depends upon the degree of give and take between the couple, usually demanding more tolerance and more giving on the part of the wife. The reason for this being that one of the codes prescribed for women is to be as tolerant as the earth, whereas there has been no such code prescribed for men.

It is after the marriage that the woman achieves her social identification through her husband's family name. Thus, in this society marriage also means a social passport for a woman to attain social recognition as Mrs. so and so, and mother of so and so (mostly sons). Thus, marriage and son-bearing activities until such time as the woman has 2 or more living sons, become important events in a woman's life. Two living sons means an average number of 4 living children which is not demographically desirable in view of Nepal's current population control policy.

The large part of Nepalese women still find marriage and the bearing of sons as the important social, emotional and economic utilities. In this context, if alternative media, other than marriage and the bearing of sons, could be provided to these women for attaining the social, emotional and economic fulfillment, would they not go for smaller family-size norms?

A modern Nepalese woman is caught-up today in the dilemma of surviving the modern, as well as traditional expectations which are often contradictory. They are expected to provide the family with the best of both worlds. These modern women and men have the challenging task in finding the most appropriate mix of traditional and modern concepts in achieving the final objective of liberation.

Looking at the modern Nepalese women and men, I feel more optimistic about reaching this goal sooner. Apart from it, the party-less Panchayat democratic constitution does provide the scope for such changes to make full use of women as "Shakti" in developing this land of "Shiva". I am also optimistic because our "Vishnu" the present ruling King of Nepal, is struggling hard to preserve "Shakti" and "Shiva" of Nepal. It is with

this view I appeal to the International Brotherhood and Sisterhood to lend their kind support to Nepal in her long march of developing human resources in creating an atmosphere of happier and more peaceful co-existence for mankind.

Before I say "the end", I would like to summarize this issue of female status in Nepalese society in a Buddhist concept, because the Buddhist faith occupies an equally important place in a Nepalese way of living as well. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Lord Gautama Buddha emphasized that every conscious being, male or female, is a potential Buddha. "The Enlightened One", thus regardless of sex, any conscious being can attain the total freedom "Nirvana". This is further illustrated by the concept of Adhibuddha who is symbolized in Nepal by a famous Buddhist shrine called "Shoyumbhu Nath". This diety is believed to be the embodiment of highest reality called "Shunya" which has neither beginning nor end. The female counterpart of Adhibuddha is "Prajannaparmita" which is the symbol of "Karuna" (pity, mercy, love and compassion). In the close embrace of Adhibuddha and Prajannaparmita, the duality of sex ceases and then emerges the highest and most beautiful reality of oneness, which is how I tend to view the issue of the female and male in the Nepalese society.

Your kindness in inviting me this evening to speak on the Nepalese women has again proven one thing which has been my empirical experience in dealing with my North American friends on a personal basis, and that is your warm, affectionate, and friendly interest in Nepal and the Nepalese people, for which I am most grateful to you all.

Long live this affectionate friendship and long live the peace.