

MAGARS, MAGARS AND MAGARS EVERYWHERE?

[Being a Magar myself from Gorkha proper and having heard or read the glorious history of our ancestors – the great Gorkha Magars and other Magars who shed lot more blood in the making of modern Nepal, I have always been fascinated by the word ‘Magar’. In this sort note I attempt to explore how has this lexicon - ‘Magar’ - become so pervasive over the passage of history and languages.]



Magar women of Nepal in their traditional dress. Photo courtesy Hongkong Magar Association

By B. K. Rana

Can the ‘Magar[s]’ other than those of Nepalese origin in different parts of the world be the same Magars ? This is a kind of historical linguistic question. Do the ‘Magar or Magars’ as in Nepalese ‘Magar’, Armenian ‘Mugar’, American Magar[s], Greek ‘Makart’ Hungarian ‘Magyar’, Italian ‘Magari’ and Persian ‘Magar’ cognate with each other or have they derived from the same root ? Can a particular cognate in different languages refer to different groups of human-beings or things ? Or is it a mere lexical coincidence among different languages ? It can’t be said for sure. It is a matter of thorough research. Only a few cognates are not enough to determine the ethnic identity and values of certain human beings scattered around the world, however, such coincidence certainly offers ample opportunity to a curious reader to think more about it.

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Magars of Nepal [563 - 483 B. C ?]:

The Magars are the indigenous peoples who constitute the 3rd largest population by 7.14 % after the Chettris 15.80 % and Brahmans 12.74 % in Nepal [2001]¹. No individual caste or ethnic population seems exceeding 16.00 % in Nepal. This suggests that every other individual caste or ethnic [indigenous population] group of population in Nepal falls in minority in a strict demographic sense.



Former minister Gore Bahadur Khapangi Magar, who has made exceptional contribution to the upliftment of Magars as well as other indigenous peoples of Nepal.

Some scholars have written Magars are the descendants of the Gautam Buddha – the prince of peace. If we could well attest it historically, the history of Magars of Nepal may stretch as far back as 563-483 B.C. By offering some linguistic and cultural clues, M. S. Thapa Magar has discussed it in his book on the ancient Magars of Nepal². He has written some research articles contesting Manu’s

¹ Rana, B. K.: Linguistic Dynamism in South Asia; Some Insights into Recent Change and Development in Different Language Communities of Nepal http://nipforum.org/linguistic_dynamism_nepal.pdf

² Thapa Magar, M. S. : *Prachin Magar ra Akkha Lipi* [Ancient Magars and Akkha Script] 1993

Dharmashastra also meaning that the Nepalese Magars were converted to Hindu faith quite recently. He does not believe the Nepalese Magars were Hindus ever.

The Magars were made Shudras, the lowest-caste in the Hindu four-fold, only after the coronation of King Mahendra in 1956. Posing as a Shudra, **Dil Man Singh Thapa Magar** had poured 'holy waters' onto the head of King Mahendra during the latter's coronation ritual. Later he was promoted to Brigadier General of then Royal Nepal Army. He was also 'prized' by the government with a handsome piece of land in Nepalgunj - the western plains of Nepal.

When objected over phone from Kathamandu, he had replied to me that he had poured the water as some high-level officers forced him to do so. The Magars do not believe that they are any Hindu Shudras. Now, the Magars of Nepal must tell others that they are not Shudras or the *Tallo Jat* [lower caste] anymore.

Historians differ on the origin of the Magars of Nepal. Some historians attest Magars already being there in Nepal by the later half of 8th century³. They prescribe King Aramudi of Rajtarangini to discuss it. While others, mostly the western scholars from Hamilton⁴ down to the present seem to believe Magars, a Tibeto-Burman group of people, who speak one of the Tibeto-Burman languages and practice other cultures in South Asia.

Magar in Christian Egypt [- 390 A.D.]:

There is a short story with some archaeological illustrations of **Deir Abu Magar**: [St. Macarius] and his Monastery in Egypt.

“This monastery can be seen west from the Cairo-Alexandria desert highway at about 129 Km. to Alexandria or 86 to Cairo. It is said that the Christian, St. Magar [Maker], who lived as a hermit monk in a cave for over forty years, received a divine revelation in the form of a dream to build a church. When he died in 390 A.D, he was buried in his beloved cave, but his monks remained and the cell where he was buried became the Venter of the monastery. His relics were kept as treasures and still remain. The monastery became a memorial to him so that people might not forget his story, devotion and piety”⁵.

A Leiden University team from the Netherlands is excavating there since 1995 and it is hoped that “they may end up providing an analysis of how a loose group of hermits might have evolved into a monastic society”.

³ Rana, B. K. : A Short Note on King Aramudi and Other Magar Rulers of Kali Gandaki Region: http://nipforum.org/king_aramudi.pdf

⁴ Hamilton, F. B: An Account of Kingdom of Nepal 1819

⁵ Dunn, Jimmy: The Monastery of St. Macarius [Deir Abu Magar] <http://www.toureqypt.net/featurestories/magar.htm>

Mongols, Moghol and Magars:

The Magars of Nepal also believe that they are the offspring of the Mongols. If it is so, this directly takes us to the Royal Family of the Great Mongol Empire, *Yeke Mongol Ulus*, and the Genghis Khan himself. But there should be a standard research before jumping into any such conclusion. However, the Kham Magars of west Nepal, such as Budha, Gharti, Puns and few others may be taken into consideration. These western Magars might have migrated from the Kham province of Tibet. These western Magars do not profess Hinduism.

A well known historian and linguist, the much revered Iman Singh Chemjong⁶ and some others believe 'Magars' to be the children of the Mongols. Chemjong goes deep into the morphemes of the word 'Magar' to find 'mong + ar/or/ur'. He argues 'mong' means 'of Mongols' and 'ar/or' = children, however, this view is also not well taken. A Mongolian informant told me here in Cambridge that the explanation is incorrect.

Andrew Shimunek, in an email message writes "the Moghol [or Mogholi as they are called in Persian] people living mostly in the Heart province of Afghanistan. They are descendants of the Negüderi Qara'una clan of the Mongols, who in occupied the area in the 13th century, and their ethnonym is certainly derived from the Mongol word /mongGol/ 'Mongol' [where /G/ indicates an uvular stop and /ng/ a velar nasal]. In the 1970s, there were a small number of Moghol elders who could still speak the language, and from fieldwork data collected around that time by the German scholar Michael Weiers we know that their language is a rather conservative Mongolic language, preserving for example certain diphthongs and the voiceless aspirated uvular stop [q] of Middle Mongolian. As to the present language situation, it is unclear; even Weiers does not know if speakers still exist".⁷

I have also received another email communication from the Museum of Science and Mugar Omni Theatre in Cambridge. A Michael from the Mugar Omni Theatre writes: 'Mugar' means meeting in 'Kabyle', one of the Berber languages. There is also a 'Mugar hill' in south of Algeria. The caravanserail used to meet near this hill, hence the name. I don't know much about it. You should direct to a Berber [Amazigh] language'⁸. There is a place called 'Mugarodos' in northern Spain on the east Atlantic seashore. And we have yet another 'Mugarjong' – the fort of the Magars - in Sikkim, east of Nepal.

Magyars of Hungary:

⁶ Chemjong, Iman Singh : The history and culture of the kirat people 1967

⁷ Andrew Shimunek <shenanzhu@yahoo.com> [Email communication Friday, April 22, 2005]

⁸ Museum of Science and Mugar Omni Theatre in Boston <http://www.mos.org/> Mugar: info@mugar.info [Email communication Thursday, April 21, 2005]

A team of Hungarian Magyars was on a research visit to some Magar settlements in different parts of Nepal, possibly in search for their ancestors in around 1990. I am still hoping to read their research findings.

Also a Hungarian researcher, Alexander Csoma de Körös, while in search for his ancestors, died in Darjeeling, a hill-town of eastern India in 1842. It is written that he was traveling to Mongolia via Lhasa of Tibet to study on the Mongols also. But some other Hungarian scholars disapprove of any such relations⁹ existing between Nepalese Magars and Hungarian Magyars.

They argue the Magyars of Hungary who speak Finno-Ugric believe their ancestors “gradually migrated southward onto the Russian steppes before the fifth century A.D. They wandered into the lands near the Volga River bend, at present-day Kazan, as nomadic herders. Later, probably under pressure from hostile tribes to the east, they migrated to the area between the Don and lower Dnepr rivers. There they lived close to, and perhaps were dominated by, the Bulgar-Turks from about the fifth to the seventh century. During this period, the Magyars became a semi-sedentary people who lived by raising cattle and sheep, planting crops, and fishing. The Bulgar-Turkish influence on the Magyars was significant, especially in agriculture. Most Hungarian words dealing with agriculture and animal husbandry have Turkic roots. By contrast, the etymology of the word Hungary has been traced to a Slavicized form of the Turkic words on ogur, meaning "ten arrows," which may have referred to the number of Magyar tribes.”¹⁰

Some Nepali linguists argue that as much as 20% of Magyar language is similar to Magar Kura or Magar language. I am unsure about it. We may require studying more on it again.

Magars in the US: How would They perceive ?

Interestingly, a well Known American hat maker **Leigh Magar** of South Carolina, had displayed his hats for sale during a program of the **Lowcountry Heritage Society** on Saturday, May 8, 2004, at the Charleston Museum in Charleston, South Carolina.

A host of poets¹¹ read their poems about hats during the poetry evening. “The **Lowcountry Heritage Society** was created in 1994 and is dedicated to the production of new works of art, music and literature about or inspired by the South Carolina Lowcountry. It operates in conjunction with the College of Charleston School of the Arts and is a nonprofit. The society produces two events each year, so far creating over 44 new musical works by 14 composers, two

⁹ Laszlo, Gyula: The Magyars, Their Life and Civilisation 1996[ISBN 9631342263]

¹⁰ Hungary : Early History <http://countrystudies.us/hungary/4.htm>

¹¹ Carol Furtwangler, Don Geddes, Ellen Hyatt, Susan Meyers George Pope, Gloria Allen, Jeff Bollier, Sue Finch Stevens, Charles W. Waring III, and Dennis Ward Stiles.

modern dance works, a ballet, two literary anthologies, an original play, and 13 art exhibits. The society's two books are available for purchase. The organization celebrated 10 years of the "arts in harmony" in February"¹².

I have had a chance to read on some 'US Magar' professionals other than the Nepalese Magars in this great nation on the earth. There were at least two families of 'Magars' in Vermont and one each 'Magar' family in at least other 23 different states of USA in 1840.

Some 'Mugars' are doing fine businesses in Boston and some other parts of USA. These Mugars have migrated here from Armenia in 1905. I have no idea how these American 'Magars or Mugars' perceive themselves but it is worth taking note that they also bear the same 'last name' as the Magars of Nepal.

It is quite interesting to note that some Nepalese Magars are converting to Christian faith¹³ nowadays. And I perceive this is practical in their part as the 'Shudra element' discussed above still dehumanizes them in the country.

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¹² Carolina Arts Online: <http://www.carolinaarts.com/504lowcountryheritage.html>

¹³ The Bible in Magar: <http://www.worldscriptures.org/pages/magar.html>