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Caste, State, and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal

NANCY E. LEVINE

Models of ethnicity in Nepal stress, on the one hand, unlimited ethnic diversity and, on the other, a rather limited set of ethnic contrasts: Hindu versus Buddhist, tribe versus caste, mountain versus middle hills versus lowland Terai. However, ethnic relations in Humla District, in Nepal's far northwest Karnali Zone, are characterized more by interaction, interdependence, and mobility than contrasts and boundaries between groups.¹ In Humla, individuals and even entire villages readily change their ethnic affiliation and their position in the caste system. There, too, ethnic groups are linked by a regional economic and social system, and changes in a group's ethnic affiliations are coincident with changes in their economy and style of life. Finally, the case of Humla reaffirms what other scholars have noted: ethnic relations today are the outcome of a historical process of accommodation between regional ethnic systems and the policies of a centralizing state.

Humla and the northwest provide a particularly instructive case for understanding the processes of ethnic accommodation in the Himalayan regions of Nepal. This is a region where Nepal's principal ethnic groups have lived alongside one another for longer periods than elsewhere in the country. This also is a region where non-Hindu ethnic groups fell under Hindu rule at an early date. And, like the rest of Nepal, Humla populations have been subject to a state that discriminated between its citizens on the basis of ethnic identity and caste position.

State Policies and Ethnic Group Formation

The ethnic mix that we see in Nepal today is the outcome of governmental attempts to grapple with the country's remarkable ethnic diversity and peoples' responses to the system the government created. As András Höfer points out in his landmark study (1979), territorial unification of the country in 1789 was only a first

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anonymous reviewers of this paper for the useful suggestions that they made.

¹ Research was carried out from May 1973 through June 1975 and October 1982 through March 1984. The first period of research involved an in-depth study of one Tibetan-speaking community. The second period, which was concerned primarily with population dynamics, considered three ethnic populations in seven communities: Tibetan speakers, Bura, a group influenced both by Tibetan and Indic traditions, and Nepali-speaking Parbatiya.

step. The government also had to unify Nepalese society, which consisted of three historically and regionally autonomous caste hierarchies (Höfer 1979:43–46),² culturally distinctive Tibeto-Burman-speaking populations (many from remote areas little known in the capital city), and peoples of Tibetan ethnicity on the northern border. The response to this was to create a national caste system that stipulated a place for each of those groups, guided, as would be expected, by the rulers' own notions about caste.

The mechanism was a comprehensive legal code that went so far as to include legislation on commensality and physical contact and specified different punishments according to the caste status of the person involved. Government economic policies also took caste ranking and ethnic group membership into account, so that different groups were granted different sorts of land tenure and trading rights. This made membership in a named ethnic group a matter of major economic and political significance. Responses to this varied. Some groups closed ranks, so as to keep their advantages within a small population, others merged to increase supporters for campaigns to obtain or retain ethnic privileges. Once a certain strategy was begun, it perpetuated itself and has continued to influence how groups interpret and use ethnic identity.

The Effects of the Legal Code

Höfer argues that the government's needs in creating a national caste system were to legitimate Nepal's separate political identity, to unify the country internally, and to establish a cohesive legal system in place of existing regional systems (1979:40, 195). This may have been an aim, but it proved impossible to do away entirely with the customary law of Nepal's diverse populations. Groups petitioned to obtain official sanction for their traditional customs and also tried to modify the law to their own advantage, so that legislation became a product and process of mutual accommodation (ibid.:175). Even without such ethnic diversity, the legal system inevitably would have been modified in response both to unanticipated inconsistencies and inevitable social change (Moore 1978:2–13).

Unlike caste systems in India, the Nepalese hierarchy placed the non-Hindu middle hills and mountain groups in a middle-ranking position, despite their great cultural and social divergence from Sanskritic ideals. They were well above the low Hindu service castes, although below the Parbatiya, or Nepali-speaking Hindus of the hill regions, and similarly below high-ranking Terai and Newar castes. At the same time, the code and other state policies reinforced the cultural dominance of Hindu groups and disadvantaged those groups that conformed least to Hindu norms. One effect of this was that the non-Hindu groups, with the exception of remotely situated Tibetan speakers, came to deal with the state as the state defined them, in the guise of castes. Another effect was acculturation and Sanskritization, particularly for the middle hills groups. Caste was particularly effective in integrating such diverse groups, because it is, at base, an incorporative model for ethnicity.³

Höfer speaks of a "rapprochement" between native and Hindu status systems that has contributed to groups' present-day ethnic identities (1979:147). The case he uses

² That is, the Parbatiya, Newar and Terai caste systems (Höfer 1979:46).

³ As Dumont states, "... castes ... assign a rank, where we in the West would approve or ex-

clude. . . . In the hierarchical scheme a group's acknowledged differentness whereby it is contrasted with other groups becomes the very principle whereby it is integrated into society" (1970:191).

to illustrate this is the Tamang, the country's most numerous ethnic minority. The Tamang are especially interesting in that they lacked official recognition before 1932. Höfer suggests that they had a "minimal or latent identity before that time, based on common cultural and linguistic criteria and on the awareness of a common, mostly mythically substantiated origin" (ibid.:148). However, it is questionable that the Tamang had or have a sense of ethnic commonality. The name applies to quite diverse groups occupying a central location in Nepal's middle hills. There is no uniform Tamang culture, social structure, no overarching political institutions, and people speak different Tibeto-Burman dialects, some so different as to be mutually unintelligible (see Holmberg n.d.). The conclusion I have drawn from this and other cases like it is that Tamang is an ethnic label created to facilitate interactions with the state and created also to place the group in a higher position than their former status as Bhotiya (Tibetans) who are held in contempt for eating beef and whose political loyalties were doubted.

Caste position was a critical issue. For one example, the lower-ranking and non-Hindu groups could be enslaved for certain crimes, while the higher ranks could only be downgraded in caste. There is a gradation of fines and punishments in legal code too, according to the castes of the victim and the person who committed the crime. This was another reason for Parbatiya castes as well as non-Hindu ethnic groups like the Tamang to try to improve their status in law. Chetri, for one, won the right to change their caste title from the earlier designation of Khas,⁴ purely for considerations of status. Today it is considered as an insult to address Chetris as Khas (Sharma 1977:112).

State Economic and Political Policies

Beyond legislating relative rank in the caste hierarchy, the state influenced ethnic groups and group interrelations through diverse political and economic policies. Some policies led groups to draw their ethnic boundaries more narrowly, others led groups to seek allies in ever widening circles of culturally similar populations.

The Thakali of Thaksatsae provide a classic illustration of how a small group's efforts to retain economic advantages led to their differentiation from other culturally similar groups. Thaksatsae's opportunities came initially through a combination of good luck and location and were retained by the group's ability to organize in pursuit of common interests. First, Thaksatsae is located along one of the major and easiest travelled routes to Tibet, which Tibetans using yak as pack animals can visit in summer when the passes are open, and middle hills people can visit in winter when their agricultural work is completed. This made Thaksatsae the only permanent link in the region's principal north-south trading system (Bista 1971:53). Second, Thaksatsae men had proved helpful to the government in settling an earlier dispute in the area. This led the government to favor them in appointments to positions of local leadership and supervision over local trade. Thaksatsae men have held these positions virtually without interruption since 1869 (Bista 1971; Fürer-Haimendorf 1975; Messerschmidt and Gurung 1973).

This fact set Thaksatsae off from other Thakali villages. And further government policies reinforced their separation. It seems to have been a general practice to ap-

⁴ The northwest of Nepal is held to be one of the origin areas of the Khas in Nepal, from whence the forebears of today's Chetris migrated (Sharma 1977:104-5).

portion rights to different trading sectors between different groups. For example, the northerly groups in this area were permitted to travel to the Tibetan salt markets, but not to go any farther south than the Thaksatsae capital; the southerly groups could trade to the south, but not in Tibet; while Manang villagers received special concessions to import goods from abroad.⁵ Related to this were different patterns of acculturation. In response to their greater contact with government officials and populations to the south, Thaksatsae villagers became concerned early on with bringing their behavior into conformity to Nepali Hindu norms. This required distancing themselves from the more Tibetanized Thakalis to the north. Although the different Thakali populations probably were endogamous before the government presence in the area, the disparities created in wealth and rates of acculturation led Thaksatsae to emphasize its distinctiveness, its separation from other Thakali and its unique ethnic identity (Parker n.d.).

The Limbu's circumstances took them in quite the opposite direction. Theirs is a situation of ethnic incorporation—the massing of a large ethnic constituency to maintain traditional land tenure rights. The system of land tenure that Limbu have struggled to maintain is known as *kipat*. It is particularly advantageous, because land labelled as *kipat* is an inalienable and exclusive right of Limbu members. Over time the government has tried to convert *kipat* land to the system of state landlordship prevailing throughout the country. Limbu have resisted this by organizing protests locally and dispatching representatives to Kathmandu (Caplan 1970:172, 182; Jones 1976:72). This seems to have reinforced unity and a shared ethnic identity among a large population—in the 1981 census, people describing themselves as Limbu speakers numbered 129,234 (Nepal 1984b:25). Jones suggests, “without Kipat it is difficult to visualize them tenaciously clinging to their language, their religion and way of life as they do. As it is, they ‘have resisted the gradual Hinduization that has become the common lot of most other minorities in the kingdom’ ” (Jones 1976:65, citing Regmi 1965:95).

Thus, state policies have influenced ethnicity throughout Nepal, motivating disaffiliation within some groups and unity among others and prompting attempts to improve status within the national caste system. State policies of placing peoples within known ethnic categories also have been instrumental in creating the ethnic map we are familiar with today. For example, we have seen how the label Tamang was adopted by a range of peoples. Within that ethnic category are western and eastern subgroups, and the westerners see the easterners as no more similar to themselves than people known by the ethnic label of Gurung (Holmberg n.d.; personal communication). Despite this fact, much of the writing on Nepal implies that groups like Tamang, Limbu, Rai, and Gurung have an intrinsic and enduring ethnic identity. Dilli Ram Dahal links this to tendencies to understand Nepalese groups in terms of a tribal model (1978). Yet no group in Nepal is a tribe by any of the standard definitions. They lack such basic tribal characteristics as a common territory or over-arching political institutions.

Rai is perhaps the clearest illustration of how the ethnic labels in common use have greater political or legal than sociocultural relevance. The people known as Rai exhibit marked social and cultural variation and a marked lack of unity (McDougal 1973).⁶ Höfer notes that “Rai is an artificial designation of recent origin under which

⁵ Similar divisions of trading rights occurred in Solu-Khumbu and Tarakot (Füerer-Haimendorf 1975:61–62, 209).

⁶ This may explain why Rai, the nearest neigh-

bors of Limbu and similarly classed as ethnically “Kirati,” the name for the ancient inhabitants of that area, were not able to unify to defend their *kipat* rights.

a great number of more or less endogamous local groups with considerably varying dialects are subsumed. As is well known, the Nepali term *rai* was initially only employed for the leaders of villages and/or of local descent groups of the contemporary Rai; only later did it become an ethnonym" (1979:142).

Nepalese groups use these sorts of labels only in certain contexts, as in dealing with the state or outsiders. Among themselves they have their own categories, which reflect a more precise division of their ethnic worlds. Western Tamang "distinguish between Sharpa, Gle and Tamang, despite the fact that outsiders consider them the same" (Holmberg n.d.:9). Several groups have begun to call themselves Sherpa in recent years—to further their chances of obtaining well-paying employment with Westerners as mountaineers and tour guides—however, they see themselves as ethnically quite distinct. Using ethnic names for economic as well as caste advantage seems to have been a long-standing practice in Nepal. In the past, middle hills groups used whatever name was likelier to get them employed as Gurkha soldiers (Hitchcock 1965:208). From an emic perspective, this is not deception, for these are not names of tribes or corporate groups, but rather labels for describing status in the large middle range of the Nepalese caste hierarchy (Fisher 1978).⁷

Anthropologists may have missed this initially, because of their focus on single village studies, which meant less attention to how groups citing the same ethnic label varied and to how different ethnic groups formed regional ethnic systems. There was nothing to indicate that people who identified themselves as Tamang in one area were not the same as Tamang of another area. Until recently, we also lacked information on the political and historical contexts in which these ethnic identifications evolved. The increasing availability of broader regional studies, multiple studies within the same ethnic "group," and translations of historical materials have made it clear that in Nepal there is heterogeneity within as well as between the primary named ethnic groups.

Ethnic Groups and Ecological Specialization

Nepal conventionally is divided into three zones of habitation, each occupied by a distinctive set of ethnic groups.⁸ These include a northern, high-altitude zone peopled by groups of Tibetan language and culture; a middle-altitude zone inhabited by, as Gerald Bertran puts it, "the distinctively Nepalese peoples who combine Tibetan, Indian and probably certain aboriginal elements common to neither and deriving from cultures that may have been preceded by both" (1963:297); and Parbatiya in the valleys and a lowland zone occupied by Hindu, Muslim, and certain long-resident populations, such as Tharu. This oversimplifies, although it does serve

⁷ Some of these names are of considerable antiquity. Höfer states that Tamang appears in texts in the thirteenth century (1981:6–7) and Murmi, the name by which Tamang were known until recently, in documents dating from around 1769 (1979:147). When outside observers reached Nepal, many of the current ethnic labels were in use and thus fixed in the legal code. Hamilton lists as "aboriginal tribes": Magar, Gurung, Jariya, Newar, Murmi, Kirat, Limbu, Lapcha, and Bhotiya (1971:24–25). Even then, different names seem to have been used in different contexts or so the writings of a British administrator in Darjeeling

suggest: "The word 'Limboo' is a corruption, probably introduced by the Goorkhas, of 'Ekthoomba,' the correct denomination of these people. . . . In the generic term 'Limboo,' are included people also known as the Kerautis, Eakas, and Rais, but such is the confused notion among the people themselves of the real nature of the differences which have led to these several denominations, that they are often used synonymously with the word Limboo" (Campbell 1840:595).

⁸ This follows a Nepali model that has been in use at least since the time of Prithvinarayan Shah, who unified the country (Sharma 1972:13n.).

as a general guide to the relationship among altitude, zone of habitation, and distribution of types of sociocultural systems. The model misleads only when it is assumed that cultural similarity is diagnostic of common origins and that populations sharing a common culture tend to be demographically closed and biologically self-perpetuating (Barth 1969:9-11).

It also is problematic to assume that these groups settled in the zone or zones most similar to their homelands and where their existing skills could most easily be applied. To take a well-phrased presentation of this view (and see also Kawakita cited in Berreman 1963:299; Hagen 1971:80, 88):

The Hindus prefer rice-growing areas where summer and winter crops are possible annually. . . . Thus, the economy of the Hindus is agricultural, and the communities are sedentary. Although the Nepali Hindus, especially the Paharis, are not strict vegetarians, there is some prestige attached to vegetarianism in terms of Sanskritization. Therefore the Hindus seem to prefer to live in a natural environment which is favourable to agricultural production, and do not find it inconvenient to live in the subtropical lowlands where livestock breeding is unsuitable because of the warm and humid climate. (Iijima 1977:71-72)

In Humla, however, the choice of economic specialization is as much the cause of ethnic identifications as its consequence. Humla also reveals a considerable degree of ethnic mobility, for high castes and non-Hindus alike, but the poles of ethnic contrast persist, despite the crossing of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969:9). Finally, in Humla, ethnicity forms the basis for symbiotic interdependencies, here realized in a system of regional economic specializations (*ibid.*:18-19).

The Case of Humla

Humla is the farthest northwest district in Nepal, bordered by Tibet on the north, Bajhang and Bajura to the southwest, and Mugu to the south and southeast. Although it is the second largest district in the country, it has the third lowest population density (Nepal 1984a:13), because of its rugged terrain and the low ratio of arable land.⁹ Because of the difficulty of access, its poverty, and the fact that it was closed to foreign researchers, Humla was little studied until recently. This has impoverished our understanding of ethnicity in Nepal, because Humla is our best illustration of the effects of prolonged contact among the three types of populations found in the rural middle hills and highlands. That contact, moreover, occurred under a system of Hindu rule that has existed for centuries.

The three ethnic groups in Humla are Nepali Parbatiyas of high and low caste, Bura (or Byansi), and several communities of Tibetan speakers (or Bhotiya, a term I avoid because of its negative connotations). The three differ in economic adaptations, which are related to altitudinal location, as well as in house styles, items of dress, and certain features of material culture. The first group are predominantly agriculturalists who hold valley-bottom rice land; the second farm the hillsides and highly productive, recently cleared forest lands; and the last depend on a mix of agriculture, herding, and long-distance trade. Parbatiya communities usually occupy the lowlands; Bura, a middle altitudinal range; and Tibetan speakers, the highest altitudes.

⁹ The largest district is Dolpa, which has the lowest population density, followed by Manang. Humla and Mustang are tied, with a population

density of 3.6 people per square kilometer (Nepal 1984a:11-13).

In Humla, the high castes include Chetri, Thakuri, and (rarely) Brahmin. The low or occupational castes—Kami (blacksmiths), Damai (tailors and musicians), and some Sarki (tanners and shoemakers)—are less numerous and live interspersed throughout the clean caste villages. My discussion of the Parbatiya refers mostly to Chetris, because I have studied them and because they play a major part in Humla ethnic interchange and mobility. These Chetris are unorthodox by Nepalese standards: they do not wear the sacred thread, they drink beer, and they eat chicken. However, in matters of social structure, they are similar to Chetris throughout the country: they belong to the same Chetri *thar* and *gotra*—exogamous categories that presume common patrilineal descent affiliations (Bennett 1983:16–18)—and follow the marital, family, and inheritance practices of Chetris elsewhere. They are monogamous, with polygyny occurring mostly in cases of infertility, and divide their patrimonies equally among all sons. Postmarital residence is virilocal, except when a man lacks a son and takes a son-in-law as his heir. Humla Chetris have a system of localized descent groups that play a major part in village life and that may reflect the great stability and antiquity of their Humla settlements. They are careful to provide a dowry for their daughters, however small—and most are extremely poor. They observe the same ritual calendar and recognize the same life crisis rituals as other Chetris, hiring the services of a Brahmin for these, but using less costly spirit mediums for other ritual and medical needs, as almost all Nepalese hill peoples do. Chetris of this region also may be unorthodox in their high rates of divorce and remarriage; in the absence of comparable data for the rest of the country, it is difficult to say.¹⁰ However, they do participate in and evaluate their conduct in terms of general pan-Nepali Chetri standards (Barth 1969:13).¹¹

Byansi or, as they prefer, Bura also describe themselves as Matwali Chetris, particularly in dealings with the government, and this is the name we most often see for them in the literature on western Nepal (Füerer-Haimendorf 1971, 1975:234; Hitchcock 1965; Sharma 1971). Matwali Chetri means Chetris who drink alcohol—a contradiction in terms. However it accurately describes their position in the caste system, as people who should be classed as Matwali in the legal code—at a level with Tibeto-Burman-speaking “tribal” groups—who have been acculturated or Nepalicized. That is to say, they have brought some aspects of their behavior into conformance with a Nepali (more accurately, a Chetri) model, and they use the name Matwali Chetri as part of their strategies for caste mobility.

Humla Bura also are internally differentiated into two basic classes, what they term “true” (*jharra*) and Tibetan Bura, and the differences lie both in claims of ancestry and in social practices. Bura believe that their ancestors were a mix of Darchula Byansi, high-caste Parbatiya, and Tibetans. However, true Bura villages minimize the Tibetan ancestry and state that they ceased intermarrying with Tibetans long ago and either never followed or modified practices objectionable to Hindus at a much earlier date. The two express different views of the regional caste system, with true Bura voicing the conventional Parbatiya view, with one exception: they place themselves at the level of Chetri and well above the Tibetan Bura. Tibetan Bura (who mind less being called Byansi) believe that the major status gulf lies between Brahmin and Thakuri, on the one hand, and Chetri, true Bura, Tibetan Bura and Tibetan speakers,

¹⁰ For thorough treatments of Chetri culture and social structure, see Bennett (1983) and Gray (1983).

¹¹ Füerer-Haimendorf remarks on the unity of

these Parbatiya castes, their feeling of solidarity and cultural uniformity across great distances, all the more striking in comparison with India (1960:23–24).

on the other. They link the latter four groups under a single term, *thar-thapalya*, meaning Chetri Clans and Upper Valley Dwellers, with the Upper Valley Dwellers encompassing both sorts of Bura and Tibetan speakers. The two categories of Bura do not regularly intermarry, although given the patterns of ethnic intermarriage in Humla, some marriages doubtless occur.

Bura state that they have Tibetan, Darchula Byansi, and local Chetri ancestry. True or not, their sociocultural system shares features in common with each of those societies. Similarities with Byansi and Tibetan systems are most obvious in the spheres of kinship and religion. The first indication is occasional fraternal polyandry. While most of this is temporary, and the brothers later go on to independent marriages, the Buras I studied believe that their ancestors were regularly polyandrous. Second, although a dowry is the norm for prestigious arranged weddings, brideprice is paid too, and brideprice alone is given in informal marriages. Third, life cycle rituals, particularly funerals and a special consecration of first sons to the local village gods, are similar to Darchula Byansi practices (Manzardo, Dahal, and Rai 1976). Fourth, Bura make the offering and consumption of liquor an integral part of their celebrations. Finally, certain villages have their own "Bura lamas" who have special texts for calendrical rituals and funerals. Others use Tibetan Buddhist lamas from Tibetan-speaking villages, although some use no ritual officiants beyond spirit mediums and spirit medium priests (*dhamis* and *dangvis*) for all their ritual needs. Despite the beliefs in Byansi origins, none of these villages speak Byansi, or any language other than Nepali, and no one can recall a time when they did.

All the agriculturalist Tibetan-speaking ethnic groups in Humla are polyandrous, although the incidence of polyandry varies. Polyandry produces large extended households; it also results in property holdings passed down undivided from one generation to the next. Agricultural land in Humla is limited, and the constraints on land fragmentation in Tibetan social organization have resulted in a standard of living higher than other Humla groups. Trade contributes to this prosperity as well.

There are two patterns of trade, the first involves dealings mostly with Tibet, while the second takes its participants from Tibet to India and involves regular interactions with Nepali communities in between. The different trading patterns are associated in Humla with different cultural styles. Predictably the groups that trade mostly with Tibet display a conventional Tibetan identity—through the dialects they speak, their style of dress, religious practices and so on. The long distance middleman traders tend to mute marks of ethnic identity, to present themselves in a blander or ethnically unmarked way, to make them acceptable to the diverse populations with whom they interact on their trading cycle (Levine n.d.a).

The Effects of Hindu Rule

Humla and the Karnali Zone have been subject to Hindu kingdoms longer than any other region of the country, excepting, of course, Kathmandu. There is little information about the early period of that rule. We know that the region initially was part of a unified kingdom that included most of West Nepal, as far south as Dullu, and as far east as Kasikot near Pokhara, that may have controlled Guge and Purang in West Tibet and, without question, mounted a number of raids against Kathmandu. The rulers were known as Malla, and they supported both Buddhism and Hinduism. Their capital was at Sinja, north of Jumla (the modern Zonal capital) and south of Humla. The Malla kingdom began in the early twelfth century and

continued until the middle of the fourteenth century, when it appears to have collapsed. By the fifteenth century, it had fragmented into small principalities controlled by local rulers. Jumla and Humla fell to a dynasty of Thakuri of Kalyal clan, who are first mentioned by name in a copper plate dated 1620 (Sharma 1972:17–19; Petech 1984). The origins of these rulers are unknown. Although they claim descent from Rajputs who fled the Muslim invasions of India, it is likely that Thakuri families were present in Humla earlier, since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries at least (Sharma 1972:16).

In Humla Kalyal established a confederacy, initially based in five villages, but the confederacy suffered chronic problems of unity. By local account, the Thakuri rulers subdivided their lands and subjects among their heirs, producing a continual fragmentation of their political base and a continual expansion of a contentious ruling group (Sriller 1973: 34–35, 47–48). For individual villages, this meant owing fealty and taxes to two or three different and possibly antagonistic rulers. Added to this, Kalyal rulers were oppressive and taxed their subjects excessively.¹² Their power did not end with the Gorkha conquest: the Nepali government appointed their descendants to positions of local authority. C. von Fürer-Haimendorf attributes this to the services Thakuri rendered to the government in the 1855 war with Tibet (1975:277). No doubt this also was due to the caste perception that they were innately fit to rule. Even today, Thakuri of former ruling lineages are the dominant political figures in Humla District.

The system of Kalyal rule hampered the development of institutions for self-governance and inhibited unity among Humla's subject ethnic peoples. These patterns have been perpetuated by recent Nepali policies, including the way in which panchayat councils were structured. Invariably, panchayats joined Bura and Tibetan-speaking villages or village clusters to Parbatiya villages—and in such a way that the Parbatiya were in the majority. It is unclear if this was accidental or the result of a policy of discouraging ethnic separateness. Not until the redistricting of 1975 were councils permitted to reorganize with wholly Bura or Tibetan memberships. The cumulative results of this history are that (1) non-Parbatiya, both Bura and Tibetan speakers, lack a sense of unity among their larger ethnic category, and (2) they tend to form small ethnic enclaves of single villages or communities of adjacent villages who mark themselves off by their emphasis on endogamy within a narrow circle (Levine n.d.b).¹³

I am not sure how Bura traditionally were placed in the national caste system, although now they are insistent about being labelled Chetri for dealings with the government. Tibetan speakers long were considered Bhotiya. Some decades ago, they were instructed by government representatives that their *jat* (caste and ethnic label) had become Tamang. The reason given was that the government needed to circumvent Tibetan claims to Nepalese populations and territories, and that the change in *jat*

¹² Oral legends suggest that Humla's rulers were especially harsh and exploitative toward their Tibetan subjects. They also seem to have had little tolerance of Tibetans from a caste viewpoint. The Nepalese legal code hardly is indulgent of Tibetan culture either—it assigns Bhotiya a low-caste status and shows clear contempt for their habit of eating yak (Sharma 1977). And the rulers of Nepal consistently gave political and economic advantages to Tibeto-Burman groups in preference to

Bhotiya people, arguably because of their fundamental dislike and distrust of the latter. However Tibetan speakers have never had to face the sort of economic exploitation or oppression from the Nepalese state that they and Bura experienced under the Thakuri rulers of the Karnali Zone.

¹³ Berreman (1960:791–92n.) also cites facts of political fragmentation in accounting for regional differentiation among the Parhari Hindus he studied.

was to their advantage, Tamang being of higher caste status. Thus, when I first reached Humla in 1973, all Tibetan speakers were describing themselves as Tamang. By 1982, they had altered this to Lama or Gurung, both perceived to be more prestigious. These, I should reiterate, are labels relevant principally for the national political and legal systems. Among themselves, Humla Tibetan ethnic groups are distinguished by the names of their territories, Bura, either as true or Tibetan Bura, or Byansi.

Ethnic Interchange: The Breach of Endogamy

In the popular view, caste systems are predicated on the separation of groups in marriage (endogamy). This may be the most common practice, but we also find regularized hypergamous marriage across India. Louis Dumont explains this as a manifestation of the greater principle of hierarchy—here applying to the superiority of the groom's over the bride's family (1970:123). In Nepal, the situation is somewhat different. There are no regular patterns of cross-caste intermarriage: its manifestations are various; it can involve great disparities in status; link diverse groups; and occasionally even run counter to the normal direction of marital inequality, that is, it occasionally is hypogamous. Chetris, for one, frequently intermarry with other groups, and there are ready means of dealing with the products of mixed marriages (Caplan 1973; Fürer-Haimendorf 1960, 1966; Höfer 1979:81–85).¹⁴ This is true for the middle hills and Tibetan-speaking groups as well. For example, Sherpa myths may stress the society's founding by a core group of settlers from Tibet, and locally the descendants of these individuals may hold special status, but there are later immigrants as well—people from Tibet, from neighboring tribal groups and Chetris who intermarried with local women and became assimilated (Oppitz 1974:123).

Similar processes seem to have occurred among Humla Tibetan speakers, Buras, and Chetris in the past. Similar processes of intermarriage and assimilation are ongoing today: genealogies and demographic data alike reveal repeated intermigration and marriage from one ethnic group to the next. What this adds up to is a situation of ethnic groups whose boundaries are semipermeable, regardless of caste differences.

Bura especially are open to ethnic mobility, and their origin legends virtually charter intermarriage and changes in ethnic affiliation. Let us look at these legends in the two Bura villages I studied. Daiba¹⁵ legends state that this once was a Tibetan village, but that its Tibetan forebears died out and were replaced by the lineages of its in-marrying sons-in-law: one Chetri and two Indian Byansi men. Sankhagaon's first settler is described as an Indian Byansi. He was joined by a Humla Bura man whose ancestors came from Lokpo (a Tibetan village bordering Nepalese Darchula), a Humla Bura man of Byansi ancestry, a Brahmin who married a local woman, a Tibetan from Lokpo village, and two Chetris, one with a Humla Tibetan wife.

¹⁴ Throughout Nepal, Chetris intermarry with other groups, with hypergamy being the common arrangement. As Sharma notes: "One remarkable fact of hypergamy is that its practice seems to have swelled the rank of the Chetri caste most of all, so that they are the most numerous and widely settled people in Nepal to-day among the Parbatiya Hindus. . . . In fact, the Chetri caste in Nepal has been an instance of one of the most open-ended

societies in the making and represents the best example of cultural biological admixture in a Hindu-Tribal situation of Nepal. . . . This caste has been subject to a wide-spread infiltration from below by people of more obscure and non-descript social origin, but who were keen to emulate the Hindu norms in their life styles" (1977:101).

¹⁵ This and other Humla community names are pseudonyms.

Most Tibetan speakers reconstruct a more homogeneous ancestry. For example, people in Ladog and Gyaling, two of the communities I studied, say that the majority of their ancestors came from nearby Tibetan-speaking groups—Mugu, Dolpo, other Humla communities, or Tibet proper. They also place a few ancestors among the migratory Tibetan-speaking Khyamba traders of Humla, Humla Bura, and Chetri. By contrast, Rongphug traces its ancestors not only to Tibet and Humla Tibetans, but also to Darchula Byansi villages, Humla Chetri, and even Thakuri. Many of the accounts describing how Rongphug married high-caste Nepalis seem fanciful, but two Rongphug women actually did marry local Chetri men several decades ago. One of those women had three children, and they are regarded as members of their father's clan by his Chetri community.

Ideas about ancestry parallel patterns of intermarriage today. Ladog and Gyaling are mostly endogamous but marry their children to other Humla Tibetans. Ladog has taken in a few spouses from other Tibetan-speaking ethnic groups, but this is highly disapproved. Again Rongphug differs. Men from that community have taken Bura, Ladog, and Darchula Byansi wives in this generation and not been criticized for it, while Rongphug children have married into Bura, Darchula Byansi, and Humla Khyamba villages. Marrying outsiders is commoner than bringing in foreign spouses among all these groups, for the simple reason of polyandry. This is because polyandry produces a surplus of women, some of whom either must marry outside to lower-ranked or less polyandrous communities, or not marry at all. Men who are unhappy in their polyandrous marriages may marry out too, although this is rare.

When Bura take Tibetan-speaking wives, Tibetan speakers see this as hypogamy—thus, confirmation of Bura inferiority. However, Bura also marry Chetri men and women. In one of the Chetri villages I studied, there were at least three Bura women married to local men, and a Byansi woman married to a local man (who had met her while working in Darchula). This particular village contained 224 households, so such intermarriages are statistically rare as well as non-normative, but they occur and have occurred for generations. Chetris may disapprove of marriages with lower castes and be pleased by caste fellows' marriages with Thakuris, but there are recognized ways to integrate the offspring of intercaste unions. The rule given is that, after three generations of repeated intermarriages, the person is a full member of that caste group with whom the marriages occurred, whether lower or higher. This excludes unions with Untouchables, which also occur, and with Brahmins, which may occur as well, although there are no cases known to me.¹⁶

Ethnic Metamorphosis and Economic Specialization

Through intermarriage, individuals manage to transit ethnic boundaries. However, there is more to Humla ethnic mobility than this. Entire villages have changed their ethnic affiliations and not always for improved caste standing. Instead of concerns with rank, the critical factors seem to be economics and affinity. Thus, changes from one ethnic identity to another proceed hand in hand with economic changes and changes in patterns of affinal alliances. This suggests two things: that caste and ethnic boundaries in Humla are quite permeable, despite the perpetuation of distinct ethnic

¹⁶ The offspring of mixed unions also may be encouraged to marry one another, e.g., the Chetri kin of the half-Chetri, half-Rongphug boy mentioned above arranged his marriage to a half-Chetri,

half-Bura girl, although the arrangements fell through. There are no rules about this, and no additional caste categories have been created to accommodate the offspring of mixed unions.

categories over centuries, and that ethnicity can be as much a consequence of the economic and social niche a group occupies as its cause (Barth 1969).

Economic involvements form an integral part of the larger sociocultural system. To change from a system relying principally on agriculture to one that relies largely on trade involves learning a different set of skills, some of which may be caste relevant.¹⁷ It also has an impact on the household system, marriage practices, the division of labor, male-female relationships, and so on. What we find in Humla is that different constellations of economic specializations are associated with characteristic styles of life, and this is what has come to be associated with ethnic identity. In this way, economic specialization becomes as telling an ethnic marker as language, articles of clothing, and the like (cf. Barth 1969:14). And, because these groups seek their primary affines among those culturally similar, change in ethnicity involves renegotiation of affinal ties as well.

Let us look now at the experiences of two Humla communities that recently transited from one ethnic identity to another, plus a similar case in the Jumla area, a fourth community caught between two ethnic identities, and a fifth and newly created ethnic group. The changes have been from Byansi to Tibetan, Tibetan to Bura, Bura to Chetri, and from one Tibetan ethnic identity to another. Overall, Bura seem to be the ethnic mediators in Humla and the most flexible and incorporative of other groups. Notably, they have less of a commitment to the key symbolic markers of Hindu and Tibetan groups—caste and Tibetan Buddhism.

The Humla communities all had economic involvements in the Tibet-Nepal trade, traditionally having organized seasonal trade marts near the border. Tibetan nomads would bring salt, wool, and surplus animals to the mart; lower-valley Nepali speakers would bring surplus grain; and the Humla people would act as go-betweens, translators, and general trading facilitators. Their fee was from five to ten percent of the commodities of one side and gifts from the other. This was their principal source of income. They had little time or need for agriculture and, in any event, had chosen their locations for easy access to trade marts, not with agriculture in mind. When the Chinese took control of Tibet, the trade marts were closed, which led to severe economic dislocations and may have contributed to the rate or outcome of ethnic change.¹⁸

Tsalang: Byansi to Tibetan

Not too long ago, Tsalang was a Byansi village with ties to the Byansis of Darchula. It is the only place in Humla where Byansi was spoken within living memory.¹⁹

¹⁷ All Humla people, with the exceptions of the mostly landless low castes and nomadic Khyamba, support themselves by farming their own lands. However, Tibetan speakers tend to rely more on herding and trade, and Fürer-Haimendorf argues that rules about commensality make trade difficult for high-caste Hindus (1975:288–91).

¹⁸ Limi managed to continue running its border mart throughout the economic turmoil of the past several decades. This is partly because Limi had its own wool to sell and partly for other reasons, including the proficiency of Limi traders, its winter grazing rights in Tibet, which provided

continued access to Tibetan salt and wool, and its location near the Tibetan government-run market.

¹⁹ In fact, a Darchula Byansi clan apparently traces its origins to this village. Manzardo, Dahal, and Rai, who visited the Byansi, tell us: "There is information that there is a clan in Tinkar that worships a *kul devta*, whose shrine is located at the confluence of the Limi Karnali and Chuwa Khola, below Simikot in Humla. . . . It is also mentioned that part of this group still lives in this region and intermarries with the local population" (1976:114n.).

Tsalang now is Tibetan, which is a step downward in caste, but caste was not the dominant consideration here.

The underlying cause of Tsalang's ethnic transformation was its location. First, living in Humla meant being separated by major mountain chains from Darchula Byansi and nearer to Humla Tibetans. Villagers looked to their neighbors for spouses, and Humla Tibetan speakers became Tsalang's principal affines. The result was overlapping ties of kinship between them and fewer kinship ties with Byansis. Second, the location favored different economic strategies than those of Darchula. Although similarly situated at a high altitude on a trade route to Tibet, Tsalang was far from Indian markets and farther from Tibet than Darchula Byansi villages (Manzardo, Dahal, and Rai 1976). Tsalang once operated a trade mart for southern Nepalese communities, which became unprofitable after the reverses in Tibetan trade. In response to the loss of income, Tsalang switched to the more aggressive trading practices of its middleman neighbors. Villagers also took advantage of their access to the finest pasturelands in Humla by increased herding and the breeding of yak-cow crossbreeds for sale. The result is an economy based on a mix of agriculture, herding, and trade—an economy similar to that of Tsalang's nearest Tibetan-speaking neighbors, who also have become their closest affines and the ethnic group with which they have merged.

Rongphug: Still Tibetan

Rongphug genealogies stress mixed Tibetan, Bura, and Byansi ancestry. Their sociocultural system is, in most details, characteristically Tibetan, with certain Nepali attributes. Some examples of Nepali influence are: Rongphug worships more local gods of Nepali Hindu than Tibetan Buddhist associations; their women observe menstrual and birth pollution as Hindu and Bura women do, albeit less rigorously; Rongphug's celebration following the birth of a son is a Nepali Hindu one; and villagers are more competent in Nepali than other Humla Tibetans and phrase some concepts in Nepali, others in Tibetan, and still others in both languages. The kinship terminology includes Tibetan terms for lineal and collateral relatives and Nepali terms for affines. However, in domestic and other aspects of social life, Rongphug follows traditional Tibetan patterns. Marriages are polyandrous, and households resemble the Tibetan corporate, landholding *trongba* type of household. Despite their Hindu gods, these people consider themselves Tibetan Buddhists, and, although they cannot afford lamas for other life crisis rituals, do employ them in funerals. Finally, houses are built and decorated in Tibetan style, and dress is similar to other Humla Tibetans.

Sociocultural system aside, today Rongphug includes people of diverse origins. Several of the in-married women are from Bura villages, and one is a Byansi from Indian Darchula. These women have learned Tibetan and to all outward appearances have been thoroughly assimilated. Even more Rongphug girls have married into Bura villages, and they cannot be distinguished from the Bura women among whom they live either. A number of Rongphug men have emigrated to Indian Darchula, although I do not know their fate there. And in the previous generation, as I have said, two local Chetri men married Rongphug women. One of those men lived halfway between his own and the Rongphug village.

The frequency of intermarriage and the ease with which Rongphug members change their ethnic affiliations and incorporate outsiders makes this community among the most open to ethnic interchange in Humla. Moreover, Rongphug seems

to have verged on a changeover to Bura, but remained Tibetan. If it was pulled both ways, the causes lie in the economic and social changes villagers faced and in the competition for its affinal loyalties. Today impoverished Rongphug marginally holds on to a Tibetan identity. Nyiphug, its sister village, met these challenges differently.

Nyiphug: Tibetan to Bura

I have never visited Nyiphug, although I have met out-married Nyiphug women in Rongphug, the source of my information. In the past, the two villages virtually formed a single ethnic community. Nyiphug people traced their ancestry to Tibet, spoke Tibetan, and intermarried with Tibetan speakers, mostly Rongphug. Now they interact more with neighboring Bura, and Bura have become their principal affines. Now, too, only the older people can speak Tibetan, and there is no use for it, because their trade with Tibet has ended. Nyiphug has, to all intents and purposes, become Bura.

Why have the fates of Rongphug and Nyiphug diverged so markedly? As before, the two factors that stand out are the choice of economic specialization and affinal and associated social ties. Rongphug has been able to sustain a limited amount of trade with Tibet and even had its trade mart reopened in 1981. Nyiphug let this trade lapse. One might attribute this to their loss of language skills, but that loss was no accident. What I know of the region suggests that Nyiphug's trade mart never was as successful as Rongphug's. Added to this, Nyiphug was surrounded by Bura, and a difficult walk from Rongphug and other Humla Tibetans. As Nyiphug began to redefine itself in Bura terms, it also began to relinquish its less profitable involvements in trade. One need only contrast the situation of Nyiphug, in a part of Humla that has become increasingly Bura and increasingly Nepalized, with Rongphug, whose closest neighbors are a Chetri village, with whom it has intermarried, and the Tibetan-speaking Ladog villages, from whom it prefers to take spouses. When Rongphug and Ladog people gather, they describe Rongphug as a Ladog community, to indicate good fellowship and in recognition of their cultural similarities and occasional affinal relationships, although Rongphug's poverty has produced a major status gulf between the two.

Bumra: Bura to Chetri

Bumra is a Bura village just north of Jumla on the road to Humla that I have travelled past many times. Fürer-Haimendorf has described a process of ethnic change in Bumra that runs parallel to what we have seen in Humla, although the motivation he assigns to this—status mobility—does differ. Bumra villagers recently began wearing the sacred thread and claiming the status of pure Chetris. This accompanied disengagement from their former "Matwali Chetri" affines and a reorientation to other nearby groups pursuing the same strategies of ethnic mobility (Fürer-Haimendorf 1971:20). The change is so recent that:

The headman of Bumra . . . told me that he himself did not wear a *janai*, but that his son and the other young men of the village sported *janai* and had given up the flesh and eggs of chickens as well as beer and liquor. In some families one brother may be a *matwali*, not subject to these food-restrictions, whereas a younger brother may wear a *janai* and voluntarily observe the appropriate food taboos. (Ibid.)

Fürer-Haimendorf notes that this is not just a modern-day phenomenon. As early as 1853, members of another Matwali Chetri village in the region were invested with the sacred thread (*ibid.*:21).

Thus, we have one Bura village that became Chetri; a Tibetan village that became Bura; another Tibetan village citing Bura and Tibetan antecedents in which the crossing of ethnic boundaries commonly occurs; and a Byansi village that became Tibetan. There undoubtedly are more cases than these. We know that Ladog, one of the Tibetan communities discussed here, claims to have maintained regular affinal relationships with Daiba in the past. Daiba legends, as noted above, suggest that it once was a Tibetan village. Again the difference lies in economic and social niche. Daiba has ample agricultural resources, while Ladog villagers depend on trade and have done so for the last century and more. We find again economic specializations correlated with ethnic identity and expressed through patterns of intermarriage. We also find again that trade is an important component of a Tibetan identity.²⁰

Trade is critical for two reasons. First, it is profitable, and Tibetan ethnic identity demands upkeep of an expensive religious establishment—ideally, the support of trained, full-time religious personnel. In the past, Humla Tibetans had ties with some of the great monastic institutions in Tibet; and ties have been maintained with refugee lamas from those institutions. Second, trade supplements agriculture and herding and supports a high standard of living in marginal, high-altitude environments. I have argued elsewhere that polyandry and the large, extended household system of Tibetan speakers facilitate these multiple economic involvements (Levine n.d.b). In this way, domestic organization supports a certain economic pattern, which supports a religious tradition, with which the Tibetan ethnic identity is inextricably tied. By contrast, Bura groups in lower-altitude regions support themselves by agriculture. Trading less, they have less to do with Tibetans and less reason and resources to support the elaborate religious establishment that reinforces commitment to a Tibetan identity.

Becoming Khyamba

The most recent case of ethnic change occurred during the past decade. Tibetan speakers, mostly from Ladog and a village near Gyaling, abandoned their homes to become Khyampa, nomadic Tibetan-speaking traders. The proximate cause of this was steadily worsening economic conditions in Humla. The late 1970s were marked by a series of bad harvests, and trade remained unpredictable. Families hard hit by these changes decided to abandon their farms and take their herds to an uninhabited, high-altitude pasture located between Humla and the Byansi region. This has become the base of their new community and the site of their main summer camp. In the winter they move south, following the migratory cycle of Khyamba groups. These people, formerly members of settled agriculturalist ethnic groups, now describe themselves as Khyamba. They *are* Khyamba, because they now pursue the traditional economic specialization of Khyamba and model their social system on other Humla Khyamba groups. (See Rauber 1980 on the ethnogenesis of these Khyamba.)

²⁰ Thus, Daiba's claim that it once was Tibetan but that its Tibetan line died out may simply re-

flect the fact that it shifted from a Tibetan to a Bura ethnic identity.

Conclusion

The conclusion one draws from this is that Tibetan speakers, for example, remain Tibetans or Bhotiya, not because they came from Tibet, but because they act like Tibetans do, supported by specific ecological, economic, and cultural adaptations. Bura are Bura, not because they have a different origin than Humla Tibetans—in fact, they have largely similar origins—but because they hold to a Bura life-style. Ethnicity turns on such factors in Southeast Asia, and perhaps we should start looking there as well as to India and Tibet for our models of ethnic relations in Nepal (Leach 1965; see Berreman 1963).

The key points, briefly stated, are this. Ethnicity in Nepal cannot be understood apart from the external political factors that have impinged on villagers' lives. Nepal is a country that set out to create a national caste hierarchy and consciously legislated ethnic identities. The state also discriminated among its citizens on the basis of their caste and ethnic memberships, although the combinations of idiosyncratic group circumstances and case-specific policies produced diverse accommodations between the two. Humla not only has been subject to such legislation from the Nepalese state, but from its own Hindu rulers for centuries longer. The effect here has been insularity among the minority groups and also failures in indigenous institutions of leadership. Second, ethnicity in Nepal is the outcome of forces peculiar to particular regions. One of its characteristic features in Humla is the system of ethnic economic interdependencies. There are Tibetan speakers who specialize in trade to the north, Tibetan-speaking middlemen who carry goods from Tibet throughout the middle hills to India, some of whom also breed cattle for sale elsewhere, Bura who farm recently reclaimed forest lands at a middle range of altitude, and high-caste Hindus who farm the valley bottoms. The final point is that economic adaptations have social ramifications, so that economic change tends to accompany transitions from one ethnic identity to another.

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