

Magars in the Eyes of Western Writers: A Socio-Anthropological Review

Govind P. Thapa Magar, PhD

One of the major themes in the history of Nepal has been the transmission of influences into an original culture.

Background

Nepal is a melting pot of many races and tribes. There are more than one hundred different types of races and castes in Nepal. It appears that “for the size of the country Nepal possesses a great variety of races in its population.”¹ The prehistory and the early history of Nepal are largely unknown. “The ancient history of the Nepaulians, like that of all other nations which affect to trace their origin beyond the date of authentic records, is clouded by mythological fables”² The state of Magars cannot be different. Despite of several literary sources on Magars, the origin and history is replete with compounded speculations and inexplicit details. Information on Magars are speckled here and there. Some of these information require evidences, some are incomplete, some contradict each others, some are controversial, and quite often there are missing links in between the periods of history. This is so due to the dearth of substantial evidences, and accurate and chronological documents.

The Magars, the largest among the ethnic groups, is also the third largest group in Nepal.³ Among many other indigenous ethnic people, more recently, the Magars have been focal point of interests for many researchers and writers, both, Nepali and foreigners, in particular--Westerners. Hitchcock’s explanations for his primary reasons for doing research in Nepal and among the Magars were to answer a question about the social and cultural effects of different ecological niches. It was also to explore a region barely known to anthropologists and to learn about the home life of a people whom the world knew primarily as extraordinarily good and tough infantrymen.⁴ For Gary Shepherd, it was the great variety of ethnic groups tucked away in its inaccessible valleys not known to the out side world. In fact, only few people in Nepal knew much about them or could tell where they were located. The Khams, for instance, were just such a group. Though more than forty thousand people spoke the Kham language, it was next-to-impossible to find anyone in Kathmandu who had even heard of them.⁵

Origin and History

“It is just to find a lost brother by meeting you, it is a very strong blood, fearless and headstrong, I’m proud of my Magar blood. I kissed the soil of Nepal before leaving. My

¹ Wright, Daniel, *History of Nepal-With an Introductory Sketch of the Country and People of Nepal*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, Madras, 1993, First Published in 1877, p. 25

² Colonel Kirkpatrick, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul*, J. Jetley, (First Published 1811), 1996, p. 255

³ The population of Magars in 2001 Census was 7.14% of the total population of Nepal.

⁴ Hitchcock, John T., *The Magars of Banyan Hill*; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966, p. 2

⁵ Shepherd, Gary, *Life Among the Magars*, Sahayogi Press, 1982, p. 10

mother was so excited to hear anything from Nepal, I told her that 'only one person I met having Magar blood is Govind and I can imagine that his mother resembles you very much'. Govind, me and my mother are not interested in material things, we have everything, a very good life with respect but sometimes we feel for our missing links with strong Gurkha blood that my granny missed a lot for all her life. I have written her story in my biography, I always insist fathers of our family to be friendly with their kids because my grandma was only 14 years old when she with more than 15 other children went on adventure to visit the first ever train started from Srinagar Kashmir to Amratsar Punjab it was 1899 or 1900, most of the kids lost in the way along with her. When police found her, she refused to go back to home she said, 'my father will kill me'. Any how older people of Quetta (Balochistan Pakistan) remember her as a generous, kind hearted and strong lady, when she died, orphans and widows gathered and said, 'today we have lost our parent' she was taking care of a lot of poor people without bringing it in anyone's knowledge."

A sober lady living in Pakistan emailed me the above message. She had been here in Kathmandu for a few days to attend a seminar. She was enquiring about her ancestral place in Nepal. Her, rather, our quest is still on. I have also received another email from Deepak Rana, a person living in Singapore for many years, who has also been trying to relocate himself in '*Char Hajar Parvat*' of Nepal. He remembers his late father telling him about this place but unfortunately, the name of the place does not exist today.

The yearning to know one's origin and history is to not only establish one's identity but also for sentimental attachments for the people and place. Knowing past history is something like backtracking into the primitive stages of a society. This knowledge may not turn out payback or profits but it is a delight (or sometimes displeasure?) to know the past. I am not a student of history (in fact I was very poor in History and had to take extra tuition during school days), neither am I an anthropologist, nor a sociologist. This piece of essay is, in fact, an attempt to relate the findings, impressions, views or opinions of Western writers on the socio-anthropological issues of Magars--to an extent, a search for my prying. This essay is purely a scholarly interface, nothing more than that. It is not that Nepali historians have not written on Magars but I have the intention to deal with them separately sometimes in detail.

Michael Witzel mentions "Magars were apparently known already to the Mahabharata as *Maga*, to the Puranas under the name of *Mangara*, and in a Nepalese copper plate inscription of 1100/1 A.D. as *Mangvara*."⁶ Even in the heartland of the speakers of Western Nepali (the-*gad* area) indicate a Magar settlement that must have extended much more towards the west before the immigration of the Nepali speaking Khasa/Khas in the Middle Ages.⁷ These details go together with the presumption that an original population, probably of Tibeto-Burman ethnicity, lived in Nepal some 2500 years ago.⁸ From the linguistic point of view, there are three types of Magars living in Nepal. Kaike Magars

⁶ Witzel, Michael, "Nepalese Hydronomy," Harvard University, July 12, 1991, p. 18
http://nipforum.org/nepalese_hydronomy.pdf.

⁷ Ibid, p. 17

⁸ <http://reference.allrefer.com/country-guide-study/nepal/ancient nepal/>

living in Dolpa district who speak Kaike; Kham Magars who live in Atharha Magarat region and speak Kham; and the Magars who live in Bahra Magarat and speak Dhut Magar dialects. Many foreign anthropologist and sociologists have accomplished their studies or written books on all these three types of Magars. Therefore, it is imperative that we also look at them accordingly.

M.S. Thapa Magar is of the opinion that Magars came from East Pamir of China.⁹ Many writers advocate Magars "have no legends of origin from another place." Likewise, most Magars think that they have occupied and used their land for centuries; have changed the very shape of the mountain upon which they live with their terraces; have worn footpaths connecting farmsteads deep into the soil and those stone resting platforms for wayfarers under the great roots of the banyan trees planted long ago to provide shade enclose. They feel they belong where they are, "and indeed they do", for the people fit the land and the land fits them. And not only do the people live on their land as they feel they always have, but their many 'godlings' that control life and the resources upon which life is based are at home there also and must be treated with regular sacrifices of food.¹⁰

The origins of Kaike Magars end up with the mystical tales told and retold by local people. According to one of these stories, Kaike Magars were the sons of a woman who had fled from an unspecified village of Kalyal kingdom. She subsequently gave birth to her child, a son. The boy, when he grew up, captured an angel while she was bathing with her friends. As time went by, the son and his angel bride had three sons. These sons were the ancestors of Budha, Rokaya, and Gharti clan. The origin of the fourth major clan is different. One of the three sons was a shepherd who kept losing the same female goat every day, so one day he followed her when she wandered away from the rest of the herd. He discovered that she was giving her milk to a baby boy living in the hollow part of a bamboo tree. He brought the baby home. This boy grew up and became the ancestor of the Jhankri clan.¹¹

Much strikingly, Michael Oppitz also has a similar type of story about the origin of the Northern Magar-Kham- of Rukum district. He relates the three stories of the origin of Magars expressed in different media—one in written document, the second original story is oral but seemingly fixed wordings and the third version recounted in ad-hoc oral rendering by one Magar of Taka. The three versions agree about the divine or semi-divine origin of the present day clans or tribal sub-groups of the Northern Magar. The common themes of the three versions, differently told and yet the same, rotate around the origin of the first ancestors, their first alliances, the primeval migration movements in their homeland, the origins of agriculture and of hunting.¹²

⁹ Thapa Magar, M..S., *Prachin Magar ra Akkha Lipi*, Publisher Shrimati Durgadevi Thapa Magar, Brijji Prakashan, (First Publication 2049, Second Publication 2059), p. 3

¹⁰ George and Louise Spindler, in John T. Hitchcock, *The Magars of Banyan Hill*; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966, Foreword, pp. vii-viii

¹¹ Fisher, James F. , *Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, & Culture in Northwest Nepal*, Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt, Ltd., New Delhi, India, Reprint 1997, pp. 2-3

¹² Oppitz, Michael, "The Wild Boar and The plough: origin Story of the Northern Magar", *Kailash*, Vol X, No. 3-4, Kathmandu, Nepal, 1983, pp. 187

Anne de Sales also relates something similar on the origin of Kham Magars. She recounts that the “members of the same clan believe that they share a common ancestor and common geographical origin, which, determines clan exogamy. Each of the four Kham Magar clans-Pun, Gharti, Bura, Rokka-is known by a second geographical designation, which locates its ancient site of residence.”¹³

There is yet another myth about the Magars. According to this, the first Magar was the youngest of four brothers. The eldest worshipped Kalika and became the ancestor of the Thakuris and the youngest sacrificed a pig to Bhairabi and hence became a Magar.¹⁴

However, the mystic tales of these kinds can appease neither the anthropologists nor Magars themselves. These hardly serve to establish the origins. “We have lived here always” types of claims have to be based on facts, not fictions. anything short of these could give out prospect to remarks like “Magars’ history is lost in obscurity.”¹⁵

Vansittart is of the view that "the aboriginal stock of Nepal is most undoubtedly Mongolian. This fact is inscribed in very plain characters, in their faces, forms, and languages."¹⁶ He is also of the opinion that "the principal seat of the Magars was most of the central and lower parts of the mountains between the Jhingrak (Rapti of Gorakhpur) and Marsiangdi Rivers. That they resided about Palpa from time immemorial is well known."¹⁷

For Gary, the Magars were a Mongolian people who had migrated into Nepal in the predawn of history. Many of the other ethnic groups had legends that told how they had come to Nepal from Tibet or some other places, but not the Magars, for them, at least, history simply began and ended in Nepal.¹⁸ Nevertheless, who were the real Magars—the original ones? Gary found that most likely it was the Magar community which was to be found in Central Nepal in Palpa, Syangja and Tanahu district.¹⁹

Hodgson is also of the opinion that the original seat of the Magars is the Bara Mangranth, or Satahung, Payung, Bhirkot, Dhor, Garahung, Rising, Ghiring, Galmai, Argha, Khachi, Musikot, and Isma; in other words, most of the central and lower parts of the mountains, between the Bheri and Marsyandi Rivers. As is reflected by Landon, Magars seem to have spread widely, both east and west, after surrendering Palpa to invaders.²⁰ Modern

¹³ Anne de Sales, "The Kham Magar Country, Nepal: Between Ethnic Claims and Maoism", (translated by David N. Gellner), *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, 19: 41-72, 2000

¹⁴ Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, "Chetri caste of Nepal", in Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, (Ed), *Caste & Kin in Nepal, India & Ceylon*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1978, p. 17

¹⁵ Hitchcock, op.cit., p.4

¹⁶ Vansittart, Eden, *The Gurkhas*, (based upon the 'Notes on Nepal', 1895 AD and 'Notes on Gurkhas' 1890 AD), Anmol Publications, New Delhi, Re-print 1993, p. 6

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 184

¹⁸ Shepherd, Gary, op.cit., p.11

¹⁹ Ibid, pp.11-12

²⁰ Landon, Perceval, *Nepal*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, Madras, 1993 (First Published 1928), p. 243

events have spread the Magars and Gurungs over most part of the present kingdom of Nepal.²¹

Hitchcock is of the view that “the tribe seems to have been part of a very ancient influx of Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples into Nepal, probably from the north and east. It also seems probable, in view of differences between its northern and southern halves, that the tribe represents two different streams of migration.”²² He finds differences “especially on each side of a line that divides their homeland roughly into northern and southern halves. The Magar tribe is split into a number of sub tribes. In the southern half of the region, the sub tribes that predominate almost to the exclusion of any others are the Ale, Rana, Thapa, and Burathoki....Magars in the northern half of the area belong to a different groups of sub tribes, Bura, Gharti, Pun, and Rokha.”²³

Religion, Culture, and Society

The culture of the Magars is the result of many influences and long history. Owing to the absence of any written history and that, Magars had left their place of origin so long ago that the traces, though surely present, are not yet as easy to pin down. Therefore, it is difficult now to unravel many of the specific aspects of their history.

Both, Daniel and Hodgson, consider Magars and Gurungs as Hindus “but of low caste”²⁴ and “only because it is the fashion.”²⁵ However, Hitchcock, who spent few years with Magars, has illustrated in details about their culture.²⁶ The Magars worship nature, idols, spirits, and supernatural beings. This actually points out towards the belief in the natural phenomenon. In the rural parts of Nepal, even today, we come across a *than* (shrine)--little rectangular pieces of *gobar* or cow dung, on a platform, with a varying number of evenly spaced depressions in the top, such as might be made with the tip of finger inside the house--besides a path track, beneath a tree, under a large stone, beside a water spring, or in the corner of irrigated fields. Sometimes these platforms are uncovered, resting on a patch of earth that has been hardened and made smooth with a mixture of mud, cow dung, and water. Most of them are inside little “rooms” that are open in front and have been made with flat stones. On occasions, too, one sees a small pavilion with a conical thatched roof made of straw, about the height of a man.

These *than* are some of the places where one can make contact with supernatural beings of a particular kind—*Gham*(sun), *Jun*(full moon), *Pani*(water), *Bayu*(wind), *Kuldevata*(family god), *Sim Bai*(devi), *Nag* (serpent), *Jhankari* (hunter), *Bhoot-pret-masan*(ghost, spirit), *Boskshi*(witch), *Bandevi*(forest goddess)-- the beings who mean most to the majority of people because they are the ones who are effective in their lives and really make a difference. Coming to terms with these beings is parts of their lives.

²¹ Hodgson, Brian H., *Essays on the Languages, Literature, and Religion of Nepal and Tibet*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, Madras, 1991 (First Published 1874), Part II, p. 40

²² Hitchcock, op.cit., p.4

²³ Ibid, p.4

²⁴ Wright, Daniel, op.cit., p. 30

²⁵ Hodgson, op.cit., p. 40

²⁶ Hitchcock, op.cit., pp.25-34

These are beings of the land and the forces controlling health, growth, and reproduction. These beings, which may be either male, *devta*, or female, *devi*, are referred to as deities who eat *bhog* or food--mostly the newly spilled blood of a sacrificial animal - mostly the *Bhale*(a rooster), and quite often the *Boka*(he goat), and *Pada*(young male buffalo), and *Sungur*(pig). At many occasions, people offer *Panchbali*—the sacrifice of five animals at a time.

The *Puja* (sacrifices) are made at places where it is believed that the godling lives. The sacrifices almost always are made by a young *kumar*(unmarried) boy, called *pujari*, who bathes and puts on a clean loin cloth. After cleaning the ground with cow dung and water, thus setting it apart and making it acceptable for a holy purpose, he winds *dhaja*(kerchiefs) around a stone and sets it upright to represent the godling being honored. The *dhaja* (kerchiefs) represent the godling's new clothing. The basic rationale throughout the *puja* is doing things for the godlings that will be pleasing: clothing him, feeding him, and surrounding him with pleasant things like *dhup* (incense) and flowers. It is important to do these things in a properly sanctified place, with rituals conducted by a person who has prepared himself by bathing and who has not yet lost the extra purity believed to belong to the unmarried. This latter quality is especially important to female godlings but is appreciated by the males as well.

After making cow dung platform for food offerings and setting it before the stone, the *pujari* decorates the *tham*(shrine) with turmeric, rice flour, bits of colored cloth, and flowers. Offerings that are then placed in the holes of the cow dung platform include rice flour fried in butter, puffed rice, rice mixed with water and sage and cow's milk. The godling also is honored by offerings of flowers and by the presence of fire in the form of a mustard oil lamp in a copper container-*diyoy*.

Just before the sacrifice, the *pujari* makes an incense of butter and sage and prays for whatever boon he wishes, pointing out that he is about to offer a sacrifice. The animal to be offered is sanctified by putting water, rice, and sage on the head, the animal then shakes its head or body which is taken as a sign that the animal has given its *consent* to be sacrificed. Then only it is beheaded. The head is placed before the stone and the blood is spurted in the *than*(shrine). After this the *pujari* prepares *tika* by mixing blood of the sacrificed animal with some rice and places this onto the foreheads of those present. He also receives *tika* by having one of the worshippers do the same for him. As a gift for the *pujari's* services, he gets the head of the sacrificed animal and whatever food has been brought as an offering. The final act of *puja* is cooking and eating the sacrificed animal that now has been shared with the godling.

On the other hand historically the Tarangpur (Dolpa) Magars - neither a full-fledged Hindu caste nor unalloyed Tibetan Buddhists, but always at the mercy of outsiders, who were one or the other had to defer, serially or simultaneously, to both Hindu and Buddhist sources of power, prestige, and influence."²⁷ For Fisher, "Buddhism and Hinduism are historical accretion. The Magars and other Tibeto-Burman groups were apparently

²⁷ Fisher, James F., op. cit., p. 34-35

neither Buddhist nor Hindu originally.”²⁸ Like tribes elsewhere in South Asia, the Magars of Tarangpur “live on the fringes on Hindu society, but unlike most of these other tribal peoples, they also live on the fringes of Buddhist society. Tarangpur is culturally convoluted, geographically isolated, and socially ingrown.”²⁹

The preference in Tarangpur of Dolpa district, according to Fisher, is not of one religion over another but a preference for politics over religion, because politics is inextricably bound up with the core of Tarangpur life, namely, the pursuit of power, status and wealth. The key to securing these lies in the hands of the Hindu modernists the national elite in Kathmandu and their functionaries in outlying area, who are directly and explicitly attempting to integrate Tarangpur into modernist Hindu political and economic structures. There is no comparable pull from the north. Ironically, the mountaineers of Tarangpur look up to the lowlanders. Rather than either ‘Sanskritization’ or ‘Tibetanization,’ a process of religious triangulation is under way. For the descendants of the few high caste Thakuri families who settled, intermarried, and were hence ‘Magarized,’ the process is even more complex. The indigenous cult, centered on local mountain deities, has been overlaid with Tibetan Buddhism, and Hinduism in turn has challenged this.³⁰

The Language

The Magars, the aboriginal stock of Nepal, are most undoubtedly Mongolian. These Magars speak Tibeto-Burman dialect. Even within this Tibeto-Burman family *Kham* dialect is spoken by Magars in Mid-Western region, *Tarali* or *Kaike* in Dolpa district of North-Western region, and *Dhut*, mostly in the West and Central part of Nepal. The population of Magars speaking the various Magar language is 3.39% of the total population of Nepal (2001 census). Other remaining Magars speak Khas, and Nepali. The Magar tongue speaking population in 1952/54, 1991, and 2001 were 273780, 430264, and 770116 respectively. The study of the trend in mother tongue retention shows that Magar language retention rate has increased from 32.1% in 1991 to 47.7% in 2001 census. According to the number of people speaking a language, Magar language is ranked as the seventh most widely spoken language in Nepal.

According to Fisher, Kaike is an unwritten Tibeto-Burman language, distantly related to Tibetan and other Tibeto- Burman dialects spoken elsewhere in Nepal.”³¹ He further explains the complexity of the language as follows: “Using a list of 100 basic words I found that Kaike shared 49% cognates with the Tibetan dialect spoken in Tichurong 49% with the very closely related Tibetan dialect spoken in what Snellgrove calls " Inner Dolpo," 35% with Kham, and 23% with Magar.”³² He concludes that, “In nine of the thirteen villages, Tibetan is spoken; one village (Riwa) is Nepali-speaking; in only three

²⁸ Fisher, James F., op.cit., p. 208

²⁹ Ibid, p. 14

³⁰ Ibid, p. 14

³¹ Ibid, p. 21

³² Ibid, P.208

villages (Tarangpur, Tarakot, and Tupa)—and nowhere else in the world—is Kaike spoken.”³³

David E. Watters has been a known figure in the contribution of the study of *Kham* language of Magars. According to him, the Kham is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the upper valleys of the Rukum, Rolpa, and Baglung districts of Mid-Western Nepal by more than 50,000 people. Scattered populations also exist in Jajarkot, Dailekh, Kalikot, Achham, and Doti. The language should not be confused with the Tibetan *Khams* of eastern Tibet. The majority of Kham speakers are Budhas, Puns, Ghartis, and Rokhas—all classified ethnically as subtribes or clans of the Magar tribe. It should not be assumed *a priori*, however, that because speakers of Kham are Magars their language too is a dialect of Magars. Kham and Magar are vastly different languages. Thus, to avoid confusion with Tibetan Kham, and to link the language with the ethnicity of its speakers, the language has sometimes been referred to as Kham-Magar.³⁴

Watters narrates, "Kham is known to Nepalis of the region as “Khamkura,” which, roughly translated, means *Kham-talk* or *Kham-speech*. The word *Kham* itself is of obscure origins and means simply *language* in its broad sense, and *The Language* in its strict sense. In Mid-Western Nepal, where Kham is spoken, the Nepali use of the *Kham* or *Khamkura* has the more generalized meaning of a local, non-Nepali dialect. Consequently, at least two other languages in the region, Chantyal, and Kaike, have received the Nepali appellation *Khamkura*.”³⁵

The study of languages has sometimes been useful in determining the historical settlements of the people in Nepal. As Witzel explains that the Magarat "extends from the Bheri in the west to Burhi Gandaki in the east and is fairly uniform in its nomenclature: river names invariably end in *-ri* or *-di*. The names in *-ri* are found in the western part, that is in Kham territory, the names in *-di* in the eastern part."³⁶ The River *Ba-bai*, to the south of the Bheri, may have a Magar name as well: *bəy*, *bəyh* is a Kham Magar word for 'river'.³⁷

The Family & Race Relations

Most of Magar families consist of grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, and unmarried children. The marriages are usually arranged by parents. The parents of groom propose the hand of a bride to her parents. Wedding ceremonies usually takes place at bride's house. Mostly the engagements are solemnized before the weddings. Sometimes the girl may elope with the boy without the consent of parents or the boy may *abduct* or *capture* the girl and take her to his home. Such marriages are also accepted and recognized later on after the accomplishment of some rituals. In such situations, the

³³ Fisher, op.cit, p. 23

³⁴ Watters, David and Nancy Watters. 1973. *An English-Kham, Kham-English Glossary*, Kirtipur Nepal: Summer Institute of Linguistics and Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies cited in David E. Watters, *A Dictionary of Kham (a Tibeto-Burman language of Nepal)*, Manuscript, p. 1

³⁵ Watters, David E., *A Dictionary of Kham (a Tibeto-Burman language of Nepal)*, Manuscript, p. 1

³⁶ Witzel, op.cit., p. 18

³⁷ Ibid.

groom brings a *Theki* --gift of food and drinks to the bride's family for *Dhogbhet* – recognition and formalization of the marriage. If the wife happens to be already married to another person, then the new husband must pay *Jari* – compensation to the former husband. The amount of *Jari* was usually set as Rupees sixty and Rupees thirty for *Sari* wife - a woman remarrying for the third time. If a *Sari* wife runs away, the husband can not claim any compensation.³⁸ However, such practices have now been obsolete and usually these cases end up in the courts.

There are eight major clans of Magars—Thapa, Ale, Rana, Burathoki of *Bahra Magrat* and Pun, Bura, Gharti, and Rokka of *Athahra Magrat*. However, today all types of Magars are found all over the country. Vansittart says, “Of all there is no better man than the Rana of good clan. In former days any Thapa who had lost three generations of ancestors in battle became a Rana, but with the prefix of his Thapa clan.”³⁹ This tribe (Thapa) claims direct descent from the original Rajput invaders of the country, as such classes among them as the Surajbansi and Chitor suggest. The Thapa tribe has so high a reputation that many claim to be Thapas who have no right to the name.⁴⁰

Caste membership is hereditary, and people should not marry outside their own caste.⁴¹ We all live as members of a society. With the passage of time the society has become more complex. With this complexity, socio-cultural and lingual complexities have emerged. There are debates on the relationship of Magars with Thakuri, Thapas, and Ranas. Christoph is of the view that the early history of Thakuris and Chetris(or Khas) is obscure. Both castes claim descent from Kshatriya warriors of Indian origin, but there is little documentary evidence to support this contention. The racial characteristics of the Chetris, on the other hand, leave no doubt about their close connection with North Indian populations. Their narrow faces, long prominent noses and deep set eyes mark them clearly as a racial group akin to the 'Europoid' inhabitants of most of North India. Most Thakuris, on the other hand evince in their features a Mongoloid strain, and it is likely that they represent a race indigenous to the Nepal hills.⁴² “Thakuris and Chetris can still be distinguished by their facial features. The differences between the two groups are incidentally not only in the eye of the anthropologist, but it is a commonly voiced belief that the Thakuris look "like Gurungs and Magar", while Chetris resemble Brahman in appearance.”⁴³

Landon lay blame on Brahmans that they contributed “to the already existing confusion of races, castes, and classes in Nepal...by the lax manner in which they accorded the rights of caste to new arrivals, to their own progeny, and even to the natives of the hills who were content to embrace Hinduism. It may perhaps be said that they granted the Vaisya caste to the rank and file of the converts. To the chieftains, however, the Brahmans attributed pedigrees of marvelous length and complexity, basing them upon the

³⁸ Hitchcock, op.cit., pp.35-41

³⁹ Vansittart, op.cit., p.

⁴⁰ Landon, Perceval, op.cit., p. 244

⁴¹ Mair, Lucy, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, (Second Edition), Oxford University Press, Thirteenth Indian impression, 2000, p. 62

⁴² Christoph, op.cit., p. 20

⁴³ Ibid, p. 21

ultimate paternity of the sun or of the moon. Nor did they deal less valiantly with their own illegitimate offspring. Children of union between Brahmans and Rajputs were given a higher social standing than the Magars and Gurungs.”⁴⁴ Now it is impossible to trace in detail the infinite complications of the caste and consequent nomenclature that can be caused by intermarriage in Nepal.⁴⁵ Hamilton is confident that “the Khas Ranas, there is no doubt, were originally Magar; but whether the Thapas, Karkis, Majhis, Basnats, Bishtakos, and Kharkas, all now considered as Hindus of the Khas tribe, were branches of Magar race, or Jariyas, or Gurungs, I cannot take upon myself to say.”⁴⁶

The Magars, called Muggur⁴⁷ and Mungur,⁴⁸ by Colonel Kirkpatrick, occupied a great proportion of the lower hills in the western parts. They “seem to have received the Rajput chiefs with much cordiality, and have now adopted a great part of the ferocious customs of these mountain Hindus....The family of Gorkha which now governs Nepal, although, it pretends to come from Chitwaur, is, in reality, of the Magar tribe.” According to Vansittart “the famous Prime Minister Bhim Sen was the descendant of a Magar Thapa, as was also General Amar Sing.”⁴⁹ However, there are no concrete evidences offered to prove this.

Hamilton mentions about the “family which at present has obtained almost universal empire over the mountains north from the Company’s provinces, and does not content itself with a gentle rule, such as that exercised by the Rajas of Yumila, but has seized the entire domination and power of the conquered countries, and assumes a menacing countenance even to the Company. The family pretends to be the Pamar tribe; but it is alleged, as I have already explained, that this is a mere fable, and that, on the arrival of the colony from Chitaur, this family were Magars.”⁵⁰ Balaram Gharti Magar, a former minister and early local of Rolpa, also believes Magar kings being transformed into Arya.⁵¹

Hamilton recounts that “the first persons of the Gorkha family, of whom I have heard, were two brothers named Khancha and Mincha, or Nimcha, words altogether barbarous, and in no manner resembling the high sounding titles of the family of the sun, from whom the Pamars pretend to be descended. From whence these persons came, I did not learn; but Khancha was the founder of the impure branch of the family, and Mincha was the chief of Nayakot.....Raja of Nayakot, and the chiefs of this place, although they lived pure, continued to the last to follow in war the impure representative of Khancha, who governed Bhirkot.”⁵² Hamilton further claims that, “the royal family are in fact

⁴⁴ Landon, Perceval, op.cit., p. 241

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 242

⁴⁶ Hamilton, Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal and of the Territories annexed to this Dominion by the house of Gorkha*, First Published 1819, Asian Education Services, New Delhi, India, 1990, pp.28-29

⁴⁷ Colonel Kirkpatrick, op.cit, p. 220

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 249

⁴⁹ Vansittart, op. cit., p. 67

⁵⁰ Hamilton, op.cit., p. 240

⁵¹ Gharti Magar, Balram, “Mool”, in Yogi Narahari Nath, *Itihas Prakashma: Sandhipatraharu*, Volume I, p.19, Publisher Balaram Gharti Magar, Second Edition, 2057 BS

⁵² Hamilton, op.cit., p. 241

Magars, a Thibetian race.”⁵³ David Gellner is also of the view that the Nepali society "has great deal of hybridity." He further goes to the limit of arguing, "In that case the King would probably be known something like Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Magar Dev.”⁵⁴ However, why Hamilton and Gellner claim this is all the more vague.

Daniel Wright in "Special history of the Gorkhali Dynasty" has given full details of the lineage of Gorkha dynasty. According to her the first ancestors of present Gorkhali King were "Rishi-raj Rana-ji, of the lunar dynasty, who was made the raja of Chitaur-garh(In Rajputana, in the Mewar district, near Tonk)."⁵⁵ Hamilton relates two important historical events related with Nepal. The younger son of Udayabam Rana-ji Rava, Bhupal Rana-ji Rava arrived at Ridi. In Saka 1417 (A.D. 1495) he set out from Ridi and reached Sargha where, being much fatigued, he put the *devata* on the ground, and the *devata* remained there. Bhupal Rana-ji Rava stayed there for a short time, but, finding that, without some mode of life, it was difficult for him to live there, he went to Khilum, a place in Bhirkot, and brought its waste land into cultivation. In that place, two sons were born to him, Khancha and Micha. Khancha, the elder one, went Dhor, conquered Magarat, and reigned over Garhun, Sathun, Bhirkot and Dhor. The younger, Micha Khan, went to Nuwakot with his rani and ruled over it. Kulmandan, the son of Jagdeva Khan, obtained the sovereignty over Kaski. He pleased the Emperor in something and received from him the title of "Sah."⁵⁶ That means, perhaps, since that time Gorkhali kings have been adding the title of "Shah" to their names.

According to Hamilton, Tutha Sen, having been driven from Prayag, seized on the country adjacent to the hills of Butwaul, and afterwards seized on the principality of Champaranya, the capital of which was Rajpur. He also relates that, Tutha's first acquisition on the hills seems to have been Rishiyang, now "an inconsiderable place between Butwal and Palpa."⁵⁷ He also recounts, "When the colony from Chitaur first took possession of Palpa, it belonged to a Magar chief, and the people were of that tribe."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it is not known who that Magar chief or king of Palpa was.

There is no doubt that Mukund Sena was the king of Butwal. However, there remains one question still unanswered—Who he was? On the identity of Mukunda Sena, Vansitart claims him to be a Magar king. "Of very ancient Magar history we know nothing, and the first time that they came into prominence as a great power is about AD 1100, when we hear that Mukunda Sena, the Magar King of Palpa and Botwal, invaded and conquered the Nepal Valley, and committed terrible atrocities during the reign of Hari Deva, King of Nepal.....The Magar Raja, by name Mukunda Sena, a brave and powerful monarch ...came to Nepal from the west with a large number of mounted troops, and subdued Hari Deva, the son of Rama Sinha Deva. Of the Nepalese troops some were slain and others fled. Great confusion reigned in the three cities. The victorious soldiers broke and

⁵³ Hamilton, op.cit., p. 52

⁵⁴ Lawoti, Sagun S., "Oxford scholar urges Nepal to come to terms with 'hybrid past'", *The Himalayan Times*, April 29, 2003, p. 1

⁵⁵ Daniel Wright, op.cit., pp. 273-284

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 276

⁵⁷ Hamilton, op.cit., pp. 130-131

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 178

disfigured the images of the gods and took the Bhairava, in front of Machindranatha, to their own country, Palpa and Botwal. With this Raja the Khas and Magar castes came to Nepal."⁵⁹ There is a temple of Bhairava in Palpa even today. It is said that Mukunda Sena had brought and installed this Bhairava god.⁶⁰ Hitchcock appears to have the same view of Mukunda Sena as he writes, "...it was in this southern area, anciently called the Bara Mangranth, that Magars first made their appearance in written history. During the twelfth century, they sacked the Kathmandu Valley that long had been the seat of urban, civilized culture in Nepal."⁶¹ Gary Shepherd also is of the view that in the sixteenth century the Magars invaded Kathmandu under the leadership of the Palpa king Mukunda Sen.⁶² Daniel Wright in her book mentions about the attack of Mukunda Sena but does not state whether Mukund Sena was a Magar king or not. Interestingly, Nepali historian differs on the standing of Mukund Sena. Dr. Jagdish Chandra Regmi, claims that Mani Mukunda Sen was a Thakuri king who ruled in 1540-1575 AD.⁶³

There is an account of the battle in between king Aramudi⁶⁴(of Gulmi or Palpa?) and Jayapida, the king of Kashmir, in Stein's, *Kalhana's Rajatrangini: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kasmir*. Michael Witzel, relates that the battle took place on the *Kala-Gandika*, modern name *Kali Gandaki*. The Kashmiri king was defeated and kept as a prisoner in a fortress built high above the bank of the *Kalagandika*. The place where the Kashmiri king was kept temporarily is called by Kalhana *asma-vesman* "stone house". In modern Nepal there is a Gulmi district, situated on the west bank of the Kali Gandaki; *Gandigulma* is already known from two documents of 998 and 1165 A.D. and *Gandigulmavisaya*, a district, is mentioned in a Buddhist ms. of 1092/3 A.D. Now, *gulma* means "police station, toll station", and M.R. Pant conjectures that king Aramudi's "stone house" was intended to be Gulmi.⁶⁵

It is unfortunate that there is no mention in the history of Nepal as to who was Aramudi? As that kingdom now has become "a thing of the past", it does not survive even "in stories."⁶⁶As to the answers to these questions, Witzel is of the views that "*Aramu-di* (or *Ara-modi*?) might represent a Magar name for the area this "King of Nepal" had under his reign. If this indeed was the case, a Magar word, probably the name of a river and a region, would be attested already in the 8th century A.D."⁶⁷

⁵⁹ Vansittart, *op.cit.*, p. 16

⁶⁰ This is what I came to know from Deputy Superintendent of police, Mr. Uttam Raj Subedi who was at that time stationed at Palpa district police office

⁶¹ Hitchcock, *op. cit.*, p. 4

⁶² Shepherd, Gary, *op.cit.*, p.11

⁶³ Regmi, Jagdish Chandra, *Nepalko Baidhanik Parampara*, Publisher Bidur Gautam, Tanneri Prakashan, (Second Ed.), First Publication 1979, p. 88

⁶⁴ Witzel, Michael, *op. cit.* Notes that no such king is known from W. Malla sources or from the chronicles of the Kathmandu Valley, such as the *Gopalarajavamsavali.*, p.18

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 19

⁶⁶ Annex 1 includes some extracts from the Chronicle

⁶⁷ Witzel, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 20

Magars as warriors

In the 1750s, Prithibi Narayan Shah, the “father of modern Nepal,” was consolidating the many petty kingdoms scattered across the land. For this task, he counted heavily upon his Magar soldiers. The outside world, however, came to know of the Magar only after the British began recruiting soldiers in Nepal for Gurkha regiments. The British quickly came to appreciate the Magars’ qualities and they became a major part of their Nepal (Gurkha) contingent.⁶⁸

Almost all Westerners have always honored Gurkha soldiers for their bravery. The Gurkha soldiers have written their own history through bravery, by being the Bravest of the Braves. Five Magars—Kulbir Thapa Magar, Karna Bahadur Rana Magar, Lal Bahadur Thapa Magar, Tul Bahadur Pun Magar, and Netra Bahadur Thapa Magar have earned coveted Victoria Cross (VC) Medals and Dhan Singh Thapa Magar was awarded Param Vir Chakra (PVC) Medal for the gallantry and bravery.⁶⁹ “A shrewd critic of the war”⁷⁰ had described the situation in those times in the following words: “Almost wherever there was a theatre of war Gurkhas were to be found, and everywhere they added to their name for high courage. Gurkhas helped to hold the sodden trenches of France in that first terrible winter and during the succeeding summer. Their graves are thick on the Peninsula, on Sinai, and on the plains of Tigris and Euphrates, and even among the wild mountains that border the Caspian Sea. And to those who know, when they see the map of that country of Nepal, there must always recur the thought of what the people of that country have done for us.”⁷¹

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, who had been in Gulmi district of Nepal for her study, also refers to the military bravery of their (Magars) ancestors, claiming that it has not been recognized by the state, whatever high-caste leadership they helped to create. For example, in the history of the unification of Nepal, they picture themselves as heroes who built the country, without considering the possibility that they themselves cut the branch on which they sat by annihilating the power they had in petty kingdoms such as Palpa where they were numerically dominant and closely linked to the royal family. This situation is perhaps due to the fact that the petty kingdom which grew into a nation by swallowing its numerous neighbors was precisely a former Magar territory, where members of this group were numerous and closely related to the royal family through their cults. In a way, the Magars undoubtedly have the feeling that “Gorkha’s victory is also their own.”⁷²

Christoph also relates similar pose of Magars’ proud record of martial exploits, and Magar officers serving in the armies of the early Gurkha kings as well as in those of the

⁶⁸ Shepherd, Gary, op.cit., p.11

⁶⁹ <http://www.magarstudiescenter.org>

⁷⁰ Landon, Perceval, op.cit., p. viii

⁷¹ Ibid, p. viii

⁷² Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, “The history of the messianic and rebel king Lakhan Thapa Magar : Utopia and ideology among the Magar”, CNRS, Paris, This is an augmented version of an article published in EBHR 19, 2000. It was complemented by field data gathered in Lakhan Thapa’s village and I wish to express my gratitude to the villagers of this place (Kahule village, in Bungkot vdc, Gorkha district) for their warm welcome and their cooperation.

Newar states of the valley. In even earlier times, the Magar chieftains of Western Nepal seem to have faced Thakuri and Chetri chiefs on equal terms, and the same clan-names, such as for instance Thapa and Rana, occur among Magars and Chetris.⁷³ Gurkha soldiers have earned fame across the globe. There can be no better account of the classic character and bravery of "the best soldiers of Asia"⁷⁴ made by Hodgson. Everywhere Magars found they had also gained a reputation for honesty and hard work.⁷⁵

Need for more search

After going through these literatures, though very limited in extent, we still do not find concrete answers for many questions related with the origin and history of Nepalese people--and Magars in particular. It appears to be more confusing than before. This could have been due to my ignorance. However, I see many areas for supplementary studies and archeological works, may be just to unravel the veiled secrets concerning the origin and history of the people of Nepal.

I agree with Perceval Landon that "many questions relating to earlier days remain undecided is still unfortunately true, and the world will have to wait for the thorough examination and collation of the unpublished manuscript treasures of Kathmandu before a final chronology and chronicle of Nepalese can be begun."⁷⁶ There is one more thing we should be able to do and that is, protect and conserve the already found evidences and documents for ready references for future researches and studies. While doing all these we should be able to keep ourselves sincerely honest, neutral and free from any prejudices for writing a complete history.

⁷³ Christoph, op.cit., p. 17

⁷⁴ Hodgson, op.cit., p. 40

⁷⁵ Shepherd, Gary, op.cit., p.11

⁷⁶ Landon, Perceval, op.cit., p.VII

Annex 1.

Some excerpts from the Chronicle.⁷⁷

531. King *Aramudi*, who ruled *Nepal*, and who possessed of wisdom and prowess, wished to prevail over him by cunning.

532. When that [king, i.e. Jayapida] had entered his land, he did not pay homage, but retired with his army to a great distance.

533. While he (Jayapida), eager for conquest, thus pursued him, he defeated one ruler after the other without having to undertake special expeditions.

537. Then on the [opposite] river bank, which was on the king's right, there was [seen] Aramudi in position, displaying his army together with his royal parasol.

538. When Jayapida saw that [king's] mighty force, he flamed up, just as the fire when fed with liquefied butter.

539. As he saw before him the water of the river only knee-deep, and [hence] offering no obstacle, he stepped into it to cross, angry as he was, and unacquainted with the country in which he had not been before.

540. When the king reached mid[-stream], the river, which was near the sea, was filled by the tide rising at an unexpected hour, and became unfordable.

541. Then the king's army, with its mass of men, elephants, and horses, was washed away by the swollen river, and destroyed in a moment.

542. The king, whose ornaments and clothes were torn off by the breaking waves, was carried far away by the flood, while cutting through the billows with his arms.

543. The pitiable cries of one army, the other triumphant shouts of the other, and the din of the river's, spread uproar in all directions.

544. And the quick[foe]from other bank dragged out and captured Jayapida by means of [me] who stood ready with [inflated]skins, and[thereupon] celebrated a feast.

546. He[Aramudi] placed Jayapida in the hands of trusted jailors, in a castle which was [built] of stones on the bank of the Kalagandika, and very high.

563. When the clever [minister] had obtained the consent of the duped [Aramudi], he went to the imprisoned King Jayapida.

578. The king first fell into the emotions of astonishment and affection, then [threw himself] into the current of the streams, and reached the opposite bank.

579. As soon as he had reached his army, he at once invaded the kingdom of Nepal, and destroyed it completely, together with its ruler.

580. While his jailors did not even know that he had escaped from the prison, he had turned that kingdom into [a thing of the past], which survives only in stories.

⁷⁷ Stein, M.A., *Kalhana's Rajatrangini: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir*, Vol I, Book IV, pp 170-172