

Understanding Gender and Socio-religious Practices of Nepali Society

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to understand the position of women, gender roles and socio-religious practices followed by women in Nepali society. In so far as the status of women is concerned the stringent laws are constructed around the notion of purity and pollution. A woman's sexuality becomes a major driving factor in deciding her position within the society. The second segment of this paper would focus on the interrogation of old socio-religious and socio-cultural practices which are performed by mostly Chettri-bahun, newar women, or upper caste women. The entire socio-religious culture proves that a woman is viewed with gendered lens situated in a domestic space in a Hindu Nepali society. Finally, the last section of this paper would examine the position of a woman in a Nepali society and understand the gender position from the literature written in Nepali.

Keywords: gender roles, socio-cultural, gendered, purity, pollution.

This paper is an attempt to understand the position of women, gender roles and socio-religious practices followed by women in Nepali society. The question that would arise next is who comprises a Nepali society?

'Nepali' as a term is used in three different ways. i) it represents the language, ii) a person who is a citizen of Nepal, despite the fact that he/she speaks any other language but is bound by political boundaries of the country of Nepal. iii) He uses Nepali as a cultural symbol of a distinctive nation whose members are not confined by the geographical boundaries of the country called Nepal. (Pradhan,4) Therefore, it has to be understood that Nepali literature is not the literature coming out of Nepal, but literature written by any Nepali speaking person living in Nepal or Indian continent or anywhere else.

Further, it has to be understood that in relation to the categorization of Nepali speaking people, that not every person speaking Nepali language can be termed as an ethnically Nepali.

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In order to push this argument forward, Kumar Pradhan argues that they can be understood as culturally Nepali as they share a similar culture, language, and are bound to be called by the same register. This by definition has erased the differences outwardly and have classified people with all ethnicities and identities as a singular entity of being called “Nepali” which I believe needs to be exercised with caution. For the lack of a better terminology, I would be using ‘Nepali women’ while referring to women from Nepal or Nepali speaking Indian populace. But that is not to override the ethnic identity, or their gender roles assigned to them through their position in their community.

I would begin by drawing a brief outline of the evolution of the legal structures which acted as a governing body of Nepal. But there is no documentation of the laws with regard to Nepali women residing in the Indian subcontinent, other than the migration and reference to Nepali population living in the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim. As the early records, sparsely states the figures alone of the Nepali population. Sikkim was a landlocked kingdom until 1975 and there was little access to education due to feudalistic practices. The king belonged to a Bhutia community and people of other communities had little access to the privileges of a feudalistic state. But, what cannot be denied is that the Nepalis living outside of Nepal more or less adhere to the traditions and customs followed by the Nepalese of Nepal as the former can be seen as extended entity, in a different nation state. Richard Brughart has argued on the same lines stating that Nepali as a group is an expression of the will or character of a culturally unique people and whose political boundaries are delimited with reference to the territorial distribution of the people.² This argument makes it simple to understand how the communities of Sikkim, Darjeeling and other parts of India, have accepted the idea of calling oneself a Nepali, despite having identities belonging to that particular nation. To begin with, understanding the legal initiatives of *Muluki Ain* of 1854 would be important along with the amendments made in *Muluki Ain* (henceforth MA), of 1963, which is considered to be a landmark amendment with regard to rules and regulations and the implication they hold for women and the structuring of gender roles in Nepal. Along with this, with the help of the literature, it will situate the struggle faced by Nepali women and contextualize their position in

² The Formation of the Concept of Nation-State in Nepal.

the society vis-à-vis patriarchy and gender positions. It will attempt to understand, if there has been any influence on the understanding of gender among the Nepali women and fathom the cultural practices deep set within patriarchy.

As stated above, the first segment will trace the legal documents of MA of 1854 with regards to the position of women and the amendments associated with the MA of 1963 along with the help of Siera Tamang's work, where she has managed to understand the caste system of Nepal, as being arbitrary towards the inclusion of all ethnicities within the caste fold. When the civil code was framed and established in 1854, referred to as the MA under the Hindu king Jung Bahadur Rana, who ruled Nepal following the appropriation of power from the royal family. As no codification of law had taken place before this time, the creation of the MA as a national legal system had great importance in terms of the structuring the chief agents of state intervention. The MA was a comprehensive legal code which divided and ranked the entire population into a caste hierarchy with Bahun and Chettri castes who were earlier known as Brahman and Kshatriya, of Indic origin and usually referred to in Nepali as being Bahun and Chettri on the top, Tibeto-Burman tribes in the middle as *matwalis*³ and untouchable castes or *pani nachalne*⁴ at the bottom. (Höfer,7,22). The MA placed non-Hindu population into the middle-ranking positions above the low castes. In the creation of a caste system, it ranked Hindus, Tibeto-Burman and ethnically Tibetan people in a single caste hierarchy, thereby exercising the cultural dominance of Hindu norms. Likewise, the position of women, within the family, ideas of purity and pollution, notions of gender, sexual purity started being governed and implemented by laws laid down by MA. In Höfer's terms, the MA represented a significant advance towards integration and is the "chief factor determining an individual juridical status and the relation between individuals is to a large extent determined by purity conditioned status" (Höfer, 179). In so far as the status of women is concerned the stringent laws are constructed around the notion of purity and pollution. A woman's sexuality becomes a major driving factor in deciding her position within the society. Siera Tamang has argued that the women of Nepal are daughters of Sita whose minds are ruined by old beliefs and superstitions. This is a socio-cultural belief where a woman is treated as a devi, but it remains fully unexplored, as on one hand girl child are seen as goddesses but at the same time that woman is

³ Alcohol Drinking caste

⁴ From whom the water is not accepted.



controlled by the patriarchal structures. There are certain notions of purity and pollution and this notion remained purely applicable to the women mostly of the upper caste. Whereas, women from lower caste are seen with condescending eye and often times abhorred. But, to avoid the derogatory outlook towards women from janajati groups also started imitating the practices and started getting assimilated within the caste system. If we consider the janajati women of Sikkim, they are very matriarchal in nature and they share certain cultural practices but are not assimilated within the caste system, which is not to say that they do not have caste affiliations but is not patriarchal in nature. Gellner has argued that the culture of the dominant *Parbatiya*⁵ group has influenced in various significant ways to the tribes, so that the tribes have come increasingly to resemble castes but are far from being bounded homogeneous units. (Gellner, 106,107) Tamang argues that Hofer saw with “conspicuous indifference” (Höfer, 36-49) towards most ethnic groups in the 1854 MA by readily accepting the notion of Nepali women even if it was mostly used by upper-caste Nepali women. To take an example with regard to marriage, women of upper caste are given as *Kanya-dan*⁶ or gift of a virgin by the father of a girl in marriage to a man, is seen as married. Whereas terms like *lyaita*⁷ and *rakheko*⁸ (Höfer,41) were used for women married without full rites as prescribed by the Hindu marriage standards. This pushed women from other communities and caste to accept the norms at a larger level, laid down by Hindu code among the lower castes and tribes. Among the tribes, a prospective groom, stayed with the bride’s family for some years, without any official ceremony. Nothing to this effect, is seen among the upper caste men as stated by Höfer. He states that the number of women with whom a man has had non-polluting and legal intercourse will not affect his caste status (Hofer, 41).

On the other hand, a woman becomes polluted, irrespective of her male partner’s caste if she indulges in sexual intercourse outside of marriage. This then further asserts the belief that a woman’s body and her decisions are controlled by a man in a patriarchal set up. Höfer points out that the *feme*⁹ status and caste status are interlinked in the dominant upper caste society. This is not to say that patriarchy does not exist in non-Hindu communities but to point

⁵ Mountain people, in the case of Nepali speaking population, it would mean people living in the hilly region.

⁶ *Kanyadaan* where a daughter is offered by a father to the prospective son in law by washing her feet and drinking the water. It is a belief that the father earns punya by this act.

⁷ *Lyaita* meant brought.

⁸ *Rakhita* means kept without any social sanctioned wedding.

⁹ Woman’s status



out that in some communities in Nepal, women's roles have not been restricted to childbearing and rearing within the private home as a norm with men primarily defined as participating in the political and economic spheres of the public, in contradiction to this "Hindu template" a term used by Kate Gilbert. Tamang argues that women are not recognized as full rights-bearing persons by law and have unconvincing claims to family property only as daughters and wives. Tamang makes a passing reference to Bennett who has mentioned about women's right to property, but this can be exercised only if she remained married, or she remained with the family, even after the husband is dead. Another clause, for acquiring *amsa*/property by an unmarried woman is if she remains unmarried up to thirty-five years of age. This goes on to show that by establishing a law, the state is not only regulating women's sexuality, her decisions on marriage but also maintaining and reproducing gender hierarchy. Further, Tamang stresses that the state seeks to appropriate traditional patriarchy, and adopts and perpetuates male power (Tamang, 143). From what we have read above, it shows that the position of women in Nepali society, (in this paper, read as Nepal) is very limiting. The paper has limited itself to understanding it through the legal code of Nepal and a novel written by an author from Nepal as no such codes or books on similar issues can be found outside of Nepal. This can be attributed to the Sikkim being an independent kingdom and accessibility to education remained in limited hands.

The second segment of this paper would focus on the interrogation of old socio-religious and socio-cultural practices which are performed by mostly Chettri-bahun, newar women, or upper caste women, as they comprise of the influential population within Nepal and outside of Nepal, even where Indian Nepalis¹⁰ reside. McGee has argued that the Hindu philosophy has accorded a very high position to a hetero-patriarchal relationship, where a man and woman are bound by marriage. Marriage as a ceremony has been understood to be unbreakable. Bottomore has argued that it is a belief that a man gets his wife by the grace of the god and the relationship continues for several rebirths. The concept of *saat phera*¹¹ practiced in a Hindu wedding is associated to being tied to each-other for seven lives. A woman is believed to gain cultural status only after her marriage, whereas a man is believed to gain

¹⁰ Indian Nepalis is a term largely used for Nepalis of Indian origin. It is a term first proposed by A.C Sinha.

¹¹ *Saat phera* is translated as seven rounds around the holy fire with a promise to be together for seven lives, in Hindu tradition.

through *upanayanam*¹² ceremony. This reiterates the fact how women's identity is gendered in Nepali society which can be understood as woman assuming a sense of wholeness only by being married to a man.

Another very important practice seen among the Nepali upper-caste people present to this day is the importance associated to texts like *Garudpuran*¹³ which is read during the death ceremony for ten days. *Garudpuran* prescribes do's and don'ts to be followed by the wife and the husband. *Garudpuran* amplifies that once a relation between a husband and wife is established, it continues for many rebirths and states the importance of various practices and stresses on these issues as a part of the mourning ceremony practiced by the Hindu Nepalese community. *Garudpuran*, though a very outdated text, is still a very well accepted text and used during the thirteen days mourning in a Hindu society among the Nepali speaking population. There has been no instance found with regards to the questioning of *Garudpuran* even among the educated as well as the affluent. It is seen as a religious text, which is to be followed without questioning. After any death in the family, a pundit is immediately appointed to read the *Garudpuran* to the wives, daughters and sons of the deceased in presence of the guests, which invariably acts as a reinforcement of traditional cultural values.

Additionally, an important religious and social ritual performed by the Nepalese as well as Indian Nepali women is *Swasthani Brata*. *Swasthani Pooja and Brata*, the aim is to influence the social conditioning of a woman, in a hetero-patriarchal set-up through the story of Brinda in the text *Swasthani*, who burnt herself in the pyre of her husband after his death. This story is circulated to reinforce the *patibrata dharma*. This story recollects that, a *patibrata* woman is spiritually powerful than any God or Goddesses. Poddhar and Goswami have argued that the final aim of a woman is to achieve salvation through self-sacrifice. *Swasthani* text is a popular text among the Hindu women, which is read from *Paush Purnima*¹⁴ to *Maagh Purnima*.¹⁵ Women fast for an entire month and listen to *Swasthani Brata katha* every evening for an entire month. This is still a continued cultural practice among the older Hindu women and has been practiced inter-generationally and is taken up by younger women after coming of age.

¹² Sacred thread ceremony.

¹³ One of the eighteen Mahapurāṇ.

¹⁴ Full moon night in the month of December.

¹⁵ Full moon night in the month of January.

A very discriminative practice among the Nepalese people is that of the remarriage system, which is entitled to male mostly and a female could remarry only on certain condition. There were provisions laid out which stated that a male could remarry. As cited by Bhandari from sources like *Manusmriti*, *Swasthani*, *Nirnayasindhu*, *Satyarthaprakash*, that a man can marry, if the first wife shows misdemeanour, if the wife succumbs to death, if the wife is barren up to eight years of marriage, if the children die during ten years of marriage, and if there is only a girl child up to eleven years of the married life. This method is adopted to ensure the lineage continuity among the people and though not practised in the same manner, male are often seen getting married after their wife's death under the premise of not having anyone to take care of him. This proves that women are mostly assumed to be the care-takers in a male dominated set-up and there is no provision for widow remarriage, which has pushed women to accept widowhood as a punishment for their sin against the men and to remain *patibrata*, even to ill-behaved husband.

Likewise, another important attribute of socio-religious practice among the Nepalis is *Hartalika Teej*¹⁶. It is considered as a very important festival among the Nepali women and has growing relevance even in the present day. Quoting Bhandari, *teej* ritual is symbolized to manifest two functions. The first is to become *saubhagyabati*¹⁷, to remain/ be married. The second is to wash the sin, a woman might have committed during her menstruation. The first day of *Teej* is called *Dar Khane Din*¹⁸. The second day is the day of fasting where the fasting is observed by married and unmarried women. Married women abstain from food and drinks with a belief that their devotion to the gods will be blessed with longevity, peace and prosperity of their husband whereas the unmarried women observe the fast with a hope of being blessed with a good husband. Then, on the third day of the festival, is *Rishi Panchami*, where women pay homage to saints, offer prayers to deities, and bathe with red mud found on the roots of the *datiyun*¹⁹ along with its leaves. The third day of *teej* is the time when women cleanse themselves of the possible “sin of touching a man during menstruation.”

¹⁶ It is a day when unmarried women fast for a husband and married women fast for the longevity of their spouse.

¹⁷ Saubhagyawati referring to the gift of remaining or being married.

¹⁸ Delicacies are prepared and relished.

¹⁹ Apamarga, a plant believed to mitigate doshas.

Lastly, a common socio-religious practice continued among the Nepalese people is *nachhuni hunu*. During this phase of menstruation, women are not allowed to cook, touch pickles and plants. Bhandari cites an example from her personal experience and states that sometimes she used to imitate her mother and pretended she menstruated and would not touch this and that, like her mother used to do in the house. She remembers that was her way of constructing knowledge of gendered menstruation through enculturation process. Bhandari remembers that when she revisited her past, she remembered that, till nine or ten years, her mother's menstruation was attached with the notion of *chhuna nahune*²⁰ culture. The terminology '*nachhuni*' itself tells its meaning recollecting the stage of untouchability, popular in a public space with the culture of forbidden practices for touching kitchen and puja items. During the four days of menstruation, a woman is considered impure, and is forbidden from touching and partaking in the household activities, provided she misses it, it would cause defilement, pushing women to practice *Rishi Panchami* along with *teej*. There has however been a turn towards questioning the political position of women in recent literature in Nepal, with a focus on resistance and subversion of meanings in the songs of *teej*. The songs sung at the *teej* festival as part of rituals which reaffirm patrilineal principles, provide critical commentaries on the gender relations, domestic relations, political and social conditions in general.

The entire socio-religious culture proves that a woman is viewed with gendered lens situated in a domestic space in a Hindu Nepali society. Bhandari argues that a pure-virgin girl, a non-virgin un-married girl, unmarried older woman, a barren married woman, a woman who has only daughters, a mother, a widow, a prostitute, are valued differently. They are treated differently by the perceived social status. Bhandari stresses on the fact that women are socialised in such a way that they do not tend to live for themselves wherein they are trained to be social, cultural, emotional, tolerant and habituated to please others. These socio-religious cultural practices have been shaped in such a way that the women cannot fully put behind these practices despite of their education and social mobility. Various practices have religious connotations attached to it, making it impossible to question and stop practicing the same. Questioning these socio-religious practices would stem as being anti-religious, even if these practices seem irrational further pushing women to accept the societal standards set by the

²⁰ untouchable



hetero-patriarchal society. Unlike the practices stated above, a very strong socio-cultural practice whose practice has enabled women of Newari community is the *beli-bibah/ihī*. In this practice, a girl is married to a *bael*²¹, before attaining her menstruation. This marriage would give her a social sanction that she wouldn't be considered a widow, even if her husband died as long as the *bael* remained intact. Popularly it is usually said that she is marrying the *bael* fruit itself and it is argued by Gellner that say that the ritual of *ihī* means that a Newar woman will never be a widow, even if her human husband dies. (Gellner,112)

This practice can be read as questioning the patriarchal standards, where a woman becomes widow and her marital status still remains intact. It also allows more mobility for women as she doesn't have to clad in white dress and mourn the loss of her husband. Another traditional practice which is very empowering is *Miteri saino*²². This *miteri saino* is forged by both men and women through certain rituals and is not bound by caste, class or community. This relationship is forged with people of any community, which has led to the weakening of the rigid caste structure in the hills. This is a fictive relationship, where the person who becomes the *mith* bears a familial relationship and all the rites and rituals of death and birth are followed like that of a family. Therefore, we can safely derive to a conclusion that the socio-cultural practices are binding towards the upper-caste women practicing it, whereas towards the other caste groups, it is very flexible.

Finally, the last section of this paper would examine the position of a woman in a Nepalese society and understand the gender position from the literatures written in Nepal, as no literature focussing on gender issues could be traced from the Indian region from early periods. Tracing back the literature written in English or Nepali, with gender as a focal point would be Rudra Raj Pandey's *Rupmati*, a Nepali text, written in B.S. 1991, which is 1934 of the British calendar and would qualify itself as one of the first works written on the social positioning of woman in a patriarchal set up. The text opened up deep set patriarchal values which *Rupmati* had imbibed. It doesn't question these values, but it becomes blaringly evident that the torture *Rupmati* faced at the hands of her mother-in-law and her endurance seemed like an ideal quality of a daughter-in-law, but no doubt, it did open up a space for questioning such

²¹ Bael is a wooden apple, which has strong shell and doesn't break easily.

²² Miteri saino is a relationship forged through a certain function.

traditional values and conventions. Rudra Raj Pandey has been given a title of modern writer in Nepali society and his work *Rupmati* centred around the issues of a Nepali woman. With the help of two extreme opposite characters Rupmati and Baralputri he has showed their nature and the repercussions of being good and bad in a civilized Nepali society. Through his characters he has exemplified a true feudal society wherein, the wife is expected to serve her husband, and the man invariably acts as a master. Not just that, the *sasu-buhari* relationship, which is a complex hierarchical relationship is explored in the novel. The protagonist Rupmati has been portrayed as an extremely beautiful woman, which can be gauged from the title of the novel. The protagonist is not just good looking but somebody who imbibes by the patriarchal standards which according to the author is a sought-after quality among the Nepali women. Rupmati's good character and behaviour is considered a very important aspect. During that period, the patriarchal society had a great control over women's body and the need to produce an offspring. If one sees the codes and sections laid down by various religious texts as well as *Muluki Ain*, it is stated that if the wife is barren during the first eight years of marriage, if there is only girl child born up to eleven years after marriage, the man can exercise his rights to remarry another woman. Since Rupmati couldn't give birth to an offspring in the stipulated time after marriage, her mother-in-law asked her son Havilal to bring a *sauta*²³. Havilal on the other hand, consulted a doctor, which shows that Havilal was influenced by science. Sudha Tripathi has argued that though the novel reflects patriarchal mindset, it also reflects the western influence Havilal has had in his life up to a certain degree. His willingness to be examined by a doctor for not being able to produce an offspring, going for a movie while he was away studying in Benares and eating foods like biscuits reflects that men in Nepali society were influenced deeply by the western civilization. Rupmati, only child to Luitel Bajey and his family, was pushed by ills of the patriarchy to get married as early as six years old. But, since she was married at a very young age, she returned to her *maitaghar*²⁴ and had to come back to her husband's home when she experienced *rajaswala*²⁵ as it was considered ill to menstruate in mother's house. Bennet has argued that among high caste *parbate* community the cause of early marriage is associated with maintaining girl's sexual purity. A girl is given in *Kanya dan*²⁶ by her father. *Kanya dan* is described by Bennett as "patrilineal ideology" which means

²³ Sauta meaning co-wife.

²⁴ *Maitaghar* meaning her mother's house.

²⁵ *Rajaswala* meaning menstruation.

²⁶ *Kanya dan* is defined as a 'gift of virgin'.

that a girl is given as gift, which is understood as “gift of virgin” by Hofer. The *kanya dan* is also believed to help the bride’s father acquire *punya*²⁷ as he is the one who helps to ensure the continuity of the groom’s descent. And the reason behind sexual purity is that the man can inherit a generation of pure patriarchal lineage.

Rupmati was forced to take up responsibilities of her family at a very young age, which eventually affected her mental and physical health, straining her relationship with her husband Havilal. But she strove to be a good wife thinking, “*Barha barsa ma kholo ta pharkanacha bhandachan, patiko sudrishti pani jarur pharkala, kina pharkidaina?*” (Pandey, 28) which is translated as, “in twelve years, even the dried river comes back to life, why wouldn’t my husband’s ill behaviour change?” This shows us how women have an undying faith in the system of marriage, and how in the hope of transformation, they never question the ills inflicted by their husbands.

Likewise, women were uneducated, leading to a *malik-dasi*²⁸ relationship, where she was incapacitated into making her own decisions. Even Rupmati was given to Havilal in marriage only because he had started his education and would be in a better position to understand things than her. She had always remained a dutiful wife, in spite of the differences she had with Havilal. This goes on to show how she has internalised the standards set by the society wherein women are expected to worship their husband despite of the ill treatment meted out to them through their husband and mother-in-law. Feminist critics like Bhasin and Khan have argued that a patriarchal system have been primarily supporting calls for oppression of a woman in every sphere of her social as well as her private life. In addition, they argue that in a patriarchal set-up, a man controls a woman's sexuality, mobility, production and reproduction. The “hetero-patriarchal” rules which are blended and manifested in cultural traditions have pushed to contribute towards a stereotypical gender culture which has been socially accepted. The women are pushed to become subservient to men by observing *patibrata dharma*²⁹ which loosely reads as loyalty to one’s husband, as it was seen as a spiritual path, where a woman is supposed to worship her husband to attain salvation. Bhandari argues that *patibrata* dharma has restricted woman to associate freely with other males who might be regarded as compatible

²⁷ Punya meaning religious merit.

²⁸ *Malik-dasi*, where in it is told that a woman must serve her husband selfless to attain salvation.

²⁹ Patibrata meaning being dutiful, faithful and loyal to the husband irrespective of the behaviour.

partner (Bhandari, 28) in the novel, when Rupmati couldn't produce an offspring, Havilal chose to remain silent on Rupmati's barrenness, rather the mother-in-law suggested that he bring a *sauta*³⁰. *Sauta janu*³¹ could be seen as a sin for a woman but *sauta halnu*³² for men is acceptable and the first wife is expected to remain cordial in such a situation. Not just that, an older woman of the family never comes in rescue of younger woman, i.e., her *Buhari*³³. She rather finds faults and loopholes to make her life uncomfortable. Bhandari has described the *sasu-buhari*'s relationship from a socio-cultural viewpoint and argues that every person is expected to fulfil, his/her own cultural demands. If we try and understand the *sasu-buhari* relationship, it is a culturally hierarchical position and is often considered a natural state of affairs. In a value-based contextual understanding, it is often seen as a duty of a *sasu*, who is an elder member of the family, to train and mould her *buhari*, who is a younger person in the family the certain behaviours and patterns so as to ensure the continuity of the cultural values shared by the family. The stress on the cultural values and the need to perform in a certain fashion can be well understood not simply as family values but as a way of conditioning and pushing women to carry on the patriarchal dictums. Bhandari has further claimed that *sasu* being a member of the older generation endeavours to maintain hetero-patriarchal values as much as possible. Having showcased these in the novel *Rupmati*, Pandey has managed to expose the underbelly of the Nepali society. Pandey has managed to open up the claim that the nature of patriarchy or the rule of male is inherently an oppressive system towards women. A man by virtue of his dominant power 'social, cultural, religious, economic' controls every aspect of a woman's life.

Therefore, analyzing *Rupmati* and trying to understand the women's position and the influence of the western feminist thought, what can be understood is that the resources on women in Nepal limits itself to descriptions that does not extend beyond highlighting the position of women in a domestic and cultural space. Women are placed within the categories with no relation to the state, government and its functioning rather women are empirically described mostly within the contours of the family argues Tamang. If we continue to read the roles of the women, it is limited to understanding them from an ethnographical, anthropological and caste position, without any specifications on their rights and duties outside the family.

³⁰ Sauta as in second wife in presence of first wife/Co-wife.

³¹ Sauta janu, when a woman marries a married woman.

³² Sauta halnu, when a married man brings another woman as legal wife.

³³ Buhari is a register used for daughter-in-law.



Likewise, Tamang has argued, the discipline of anthropology in Nepal has paid attention to gendered dynamics within society and have mapped out communities and their norms of interaction and relations in great detail. However, these studies leave out questions of political and economic power as they focus on the symbolic aspects of gender and ethnicity. But what cannot be overlooked is the fight towards the patriarchal norms even in tiniest ways have begun in Nepali society. Considering the fact, that *Rupmati* was written as early as 1934, the fight towards the evils of society had begun very early.

Another writer who was vocal about the gender issues and wrote in his works is Hridaya Chandra Singh Pradhan. Hridaya Chandra Singh Pradhan's work *Swasnimannche*, had a very progressive bent of mind. He wrote *Swasnimannche* in 2011 B.S which is 1954 of the British calendar. In this novel, he takes the issue of prostitute and discusses how prostitutes are made under the societal pressures. He reasons that the economic condition pushes a woman to become a prostitute along with rape and sexual violation of women.

The text, *Swasnimannche*, opens up the story of Motimaya and her son Binod. Motimaya is a prostitute, who her son Binod thinks has been pushed by the society to become a prostitute. Binod is aware of the fact, that Motimaya has become a prostitute, but doubly assured by the fact that Motimaya did not take up prostitution on her own accord. Binod is worried that Motimaya, his mother was pushed to becoming a prostitute by his father Pramod, and the society at large. He is not ashamed of the fact that his mother has turned to prostitution but is trying to analyze and understand the reasons behind such a drastic step. He continues to see her as a pious woman and the need to question the society that is responsible for pushing women to prostitution.

Pramod, husband of Motimaya has brought home a *sauta*³⁴, Kamala, and she is constantly trying to win Pramod on her side, by persistently complaining about Motimaya. In one such incident, she brought a letter addressed to Motimaya from under her pillow and stated that Motimaya had been meeting man outside of Pramod. This incident sparks the flames of anger and allows Pramod to favour Kamala over Motimaya. At this juncture, the issue of *sautasautan*, can be explored. When two women are married to a single man, at the same time, it is mostly the second one, who is favoured and in doing so would create unnecessary tensions

³⁴ Co-wife



within the family for the sake of his needs. The patriarchal society which is largely favourable to men accepts men marrying and bringing a co-wife, without undergoing a divorce or any liability from his first wife as no provisions and laws are made for divorce. This points out the gender differences in a patriarchal society, where a woman cannot choose to leave her husband, in spite of having to share the space with a co-wife. It questions her *satitwa* and *pratibarata* dharma if she doesn't maintain a cordial behaviour.

Pramod remains unmindful of the fact that he has failed in fulfilling the duties of a husband and has brought a second wife, without the consent of Motimaya. Rather he thinks, he has ownership rights over Motimaya and her decision. He abuses her by calling her *randi*³⁵ and questions her for going to the neighbour's house. *He says, "mero ijjat bikawna gayeki ho, gharko kura pokhna gayeki ho."* (Pradhan, 36) Which can be translated as, she had gone to her neighbour's house to talk ill about him and expose his position. His insecurities are deep seated because of which he wants to control her movement, and respect the fact that she has equal rights as a wife to question his behaviour. Motimaya is a *patibrata* woman because of which she cannot imagine leaving him or questioning Pramod's behaviour, she rather thinks of committing suicide, so as to avoid facing the troubles of her life. When she could not face the torture anymore, she left her child Binod and her husband Pramod, to commit suicide. Motimaya instead was seeking forgiveness even in death, as she was going to commit suicide,

Ma gaye, Binod timro pani ho, aba usko aadhar yo sansar ma phagat matai cha, mero kunai bhool bhaye chyama gara." (Pradhan, 65)

I am leaving now; Binod is yours too. Now you are only one left in this world, for him. Forgive me if I have wronged you. (my translation)

Meanwhile, Mohan Bahadur finds her in the jungle as she was attempting to commit suicide and asked her to go back home or go with him to his house. Initially, her previous experience with Pramod, pushes her away from it, but on his constant insistence, she finally agreed to go with him on the condition that he would treat her like a sister. Mohan Bahadur says,

"Timi murkha rahichau Motimaya, aatma hatya maha paap ho. aatma hatya garera marnu paap matra haina, chitaunu samma pani paap ho." (Pradhan, 126)

³⁵ prostitute

You are stupid Motimaya, it is a sin to commit suicide. To die by committing suicide is not only sin, but the thought in itself is a sin. (my translation)

But, looking at her vulnerable situation Mohan Bahadur did not hesitate to use the opportunity to claim his rights over her. During this period women had no access to the outside world and her exploration remained within the domestic realms alone so she believed Mohan Bahadur despite her traumatic past experience. Motimaya was bereft and helpless so she thought Mohan Bahadur would support her, as until then as Tripathi has argued that the time when *Swasnimannche* was written, women did not have the freedom to work, rather they remained as mere guards to the ancestral property and taking care of their husband and children, so she saw it as an opportunity to seek shelter from a man. Women were prohibited from keeping a relationship outside the family and going out freely. When Motimaya had no choice but to leave Mohan Bahadur's house too, she was compared to *Maiyanani*, who was a prostitute. Because Motimaya left her house, even when her husband was alive, risking her chastity, she was called a prostitute. Motimaya's *sauta*, Kamala who had little morals, kept complaining about her to Pramod with a motive of gaining a favourable position argued Tripathi. Tripathi further argued that instead of helping and supporting one another, the women are constantly fighting to secure a better position in the husband's eye, which has further problematized the situation of the women.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the novel when Motimaya is left with no choice but to leave behind Mohan Bahadur's house, and she landed in the brothel run by Mishri. She could not stay in that brothel, so to escape the snares of the brothel, she goes and stays with *Maiyanani*, on the grounds that she would only provide the service of singing and entertaining. Tripathi argues that the Nepali society which highly values feudalistic attitude, pushed women towards prostitution and later questioned the same. To add to this, Binod has gone to push the idea that women are pushed to prostitution because of the questionable behaviour and attitude borne by men of the patriarchal society. Binod brought his mother, Motimaya back from the brothel and tried to reclaim and reinstate her position in the family, but Pramod thought that he overstepped the standards of society and decided to shoot him on his feet. Tripathi brought to light that in spite of her devout relationship towards her husband, Motimaya was pushed to become a prostitute. Finally, when Binod took charge of the situation, and stood his ground, that his mother was pushed by patriarchs to become a prostitute, he ended up killing his father

and stepmother. The fact that the novel ended in a revolutionary manner in itself, is beckoning to new thoughts and ideas among the younger generation. Motimaya's house is renamed after Maiya nani as Maiya Mandir, which is a watermark decision to rename a house after a prostitute, who has vowed to bring change in the society.

Therefore, the analogy drawn in the paper is to draw attention to the patriarchal society and its practices. The fact that Nepali as a community as stated in the paper earlier is a multi-ethnic community, because of which some sections are still bound by certain ills and practices. However, what cannot be denied is that the community has been progressing as can be assessed from the words of an author Prajwal Parajuly, where in a personal interview he remarks that the ethnic communities are liberal not just in the sense of food habits but truly liberated as against the upper caste brahmins.

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