

# Claim and Association of Differently Located Ritual and Political Actors Associated with the Village Shrine among the Rajbansi People of Morang, Nepal

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## Abstract

This paper discusses how differently located ritual actors (Dhami) and socio-political actors or leaders (Jimdar) among the Rajbansi community link or associate themselves with the Maharaj Than to claim or legitimize their ritual and political power what Sherry Ortner (1989) calls it “to gain upper hand” in the Rajbansi society. Because the Maharaj Than possesses ‘a great virtue’ among the Rajbansi society. Drawing on the ethnographic study of three village shrines of Morang district conducted during 2015-16 among the Rajbansi. It further discusses how the ritual actors among the Rajbansi people progressively lost their ritual and spiritual ‘power’ along with the advent of central state’s extractive economic policies, the changed environmental and ecological conditions of the Tarai.

**Keywords:** *dhami, jimdar*, Rajbansi, rivalry, village shrines.

## Introduction

This paper discusses how differently located ritual/spiritual and political actors of the Rajbansi society associate them with the village shrine called Gramthan to claim their ritual and political influence in the society through locally manufactured myth or story. Such individuals (spiritual as well as political actors) struggle to claim for the ritual, social/political power, or legitimacy what Sherry Ortner (1989) calls it as to ‘gain upper hand’ among the Rajbansi society.

Sherry Ortner (1989) tells us about the ‘social motivations and mechanisms’ behind the foundation of the monastery while dealing with the process or background of how, why, where, and by whom Sherpa monasteries were founded among the Sherpa community in Solukhumbu, Nepal. In doing so, Ortner deals not only with the political struggle between the Sherpa individuals. But one even can find the ‘fraternal rivalry’ or struggle against each other to gain their upper hand in the Sherpa society. The struggle for the founding of the village temple takes place due to the ‘great virtue’ possessed by such temples or monasteries among the Sherpa society. Following the Sherpa case, it demonstrates how political rivalry and conflict took place among the Rajbansi society. It should be noted that the spiritual power is associated with the ritual specialist like the Dhami and the political power is associated with the local Jimdar family or individuals who were later introduced or appointed as tax collectors in the local village or Mauja with the central state (Regmi, 2011 [1978]). Hence, this paper will not only illustrate how the ritual actors like Dhami, on the one hand, had been successful to legitimize

and retain their spiritual or divine power and position through their supposedly ‘direct affiliation’ with the Maharaj Than in the past, also demonstrate how political rivalry and conflict took place among the Rajbansi society. It should be noted that the spiritual power is associated with the ritual specialist like the Dhami and the political power is associated with the local Jimdar family or individuals who were later introduced or appointed as tax collectors in the local village or *Mauja*<sup>1</sup> by the central state (Regmi, 2011 [1978]). Hence, this paper will not only illustrate how the ritual actors like Dhami, on the one hand, had been successful to legitimize and retain their spiritual or divine power and position through their supposedly ‘direct affiliation’ with the Maharaj Than in the past, and when the Tarai was full of ‘evil forces’ before the mass deforestation (Ortner, 1989). They do so through the local myths and stories. I also discuss how the ritual actors among the Rajbansi people eventually lost their ritual status over time. And on the other hand, I will show how a politically and economically dominant landlord such as Jimdar also try to claim and legitimize their social and political power ‘to gain upper hand’ over the local people (Ortner, 1989). In doing so, I will further draw on the grounded ethnographic work of Arjun Guneratne (1999) among the Tharu to discuss and elaborate the concept of ‘external forces’ (Ortner, 1989) to show the ‘material transformation’ which led to loss or demise of the prestige and honor of spiritual leader called *Gurau* among the Tharu in the later period to attest my argument with reference to the Rajbansi people. Similarly,

1. A Mouja refers to a village unit. “The Mouja was the basic unit of land administration system during the Rana period” (Regmi, 1999 [1972], p. 33).



I will also draw on the work of prominent Nepali economic historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi (2011 [1978]) to further discuss the historical and political factors to discuss how the local political agent such as Jimdar could succeed to 'gain his upper hand' (Ortner, 1989) in Rajbansi society in the later period over the ritual/traditional leader (i.e. *Deuniya* and *Dhami*) following the extractive economic policies introduced during and after the Rana regime.

There have been several academic works in the Tarai people. Both Nepali and foreign anthropologists have highlighted the religious centrality of village shrine among Tharu (Guneratne, 1999), Rajbanshi (Bhattarai, 2000; Shrestha, 2068 v.s.), Santhal (Rai & Hasda, 2076 v.s.); Meche (Meche, 2068 v.s.) and Kisan (Kattel, 2011). The native or Rajbanshi scholars have introduced the 'historical' aspects of Rajbanshi people (Rajbanshi, 2074 v.s.; Rajbanshi & Rajbanshi, 2066 v.s.; Rajbanshi, 2048 v.s.; Rajbanshi, 2068 v.s.). More than introducing the Tarai people and their 'history,' some scholars have further demonstrated the importance of the spiritual power of the ritual actors or leaders such as Dhami, Yogis, and bards associated with the local village shrines in the south Asian context (Burghart, 1978; Bouillier, 1991, 1993; Guneratne, 1999, 2002; Rai, 2013). They have shown such spiritual leaders' relations even with the royal dynasty. For example, the anthropologist Veronique Bouillier (1993) has linked the relationship of ascetic Yogis for the Shah royal dynasty and their implication for the Gorkhali territorial expansion. Bouillier (1993, p. 26) observes that "through a process of a common conquest of new territory and mutual legitimation, magico-spiritual and temporal power have collaborated."

The ethnographic works of Arjun Guneratne (1999) and Janak Rai (2013) have highlighted the historical implications of ritual actors such as *Gurau* and *Dhami* among the Tharu and Dhimal in the Tarai's malarial, pestilent and harsh environmental and ecological condition. Guneratne's (1999) works particularly shows how the central state had recognized the divine power of the local ritual/spiritual leader of *Gurau* in the Tarai region. Historical documents show that the Rana rulers used to assign the local *Gurau* to "protect the people from the threats of elephants, tigers, evil spirits, disease and epidemics" (Guneratne, 1999, p. 10). Similarly, the Dhimal people used to depend on the ritual power of the *Dhami* and the shamanic power of *Oja* to protect them in Tarai's unfavorable conditions. While discussing their past time, Rai (2013, p. 240) observes that

All Dhimal mentioned how their ancestors used to live in the malarial forest, where they were daily challenged by the threats of wild animals, diseases and epidemics. So, they relied on the ritual power of *Dhami* and the shamanic power of *Oja* to them in such conditions of living.

In sum, the ethnographic examples of some prominent anthropologists make it clear that the spiritual or magical persons had great respect and role among the local people and the political agents or powerhouse of the Himalayan region country like Nepal and the Tarai region as well.

Having been associated with the local village shrine and their historical, social and ritual importance since the time immemorial among the Rajbanshi people, my ethnographic works contribute to add our knowledge about the conflict, decreased ritual power and position of the *Dhami* along with the changed Tarai environment and central state's extractive economic policies, and subsequent local Jimdar, the landlords.

### **The Rajbanshi People and the Maharaj Than**

Rajbanshi people, with a total population of 115242 people (Central Bureau of Statistic [CBS], 2011) are one of the largest indigenous groups from Nepal's easternmost Tarai in the current districts of Jhapa, Morang, and Sunsari. The Rajbanshi people share several religious/ritual and cultural practices, fest and festival in common across the three districts. For example, *Siruwa Pawani* (New Year), *Jituwa Parba* (festival), *Dasara parba* (Dasain), *Diwali/Tihar*, *Akadasi*, *Chhat*, *Maghi Sankranti*, *Neman*, *Phagdol/Holi* are some of the main festival events they observe across Tarai districts. However, among many other social, cultural institutions and ritual practices, the Maharaj Than is one of the most important social and customary institutions among them.

There are certain customary, ritual and historical practices which constitute a Rajbanshi society as a social unit or to which they adhere to. Amongst them, the 'Deuniya' system was the most important social and political institution in the Rajbanshi society. The *Deuniya* is the customary or chiefdom practice among them. Along with the *Deuniya*, *Chaudhariy*, *Patwari*, and *Gamastha* were the socio-political actors in the Rajbanshi society. The term *Chaudhary* refers to a rich man or main land revenue collector of a *mouja*. Most of the *Chaudhary* belonged to the *Deuniya* family in the past. The posts of *Patawari* and *Gamastha* refer to the assistant of the *Chaudhary* for tax collection from the local people.

The ritual actors such as *Pujari*, *Dhami*, and *Pathura* are directly associated with the functioning of the Gramthan/Maharaj Than rituals. The *Dhami* is the main ritual specialist of the Gramthan/Maharaj Than. He officiates the annual *Nisi Puja* as well as other ritual procedures at the village shrine. The main duty of the *Dhami* is to officiate the most important annual ritual called *Nisi Puja* and to placate the Maharaj and other deities on behalf of the whole villager. So, the *Dhami* is the main ritual leader of the Maharaj Than and thus has an important role in mediating the reciprocal relations between the Rajbanshi deities and individual family members as well as the entire village under the *mouja*. *Pathura* is the assistant of the *Dhami*. The *Pathura* assists the *Dhami* in the ritual performance.

### **Maharaj Than And Mediation Of Social And Political Authority**

The post of the *Dhami* of any Maharaj Than was and still is a privileged position in the ritual realm. There is a traditional practice of worshipping the forefathers of the

Dhami and his next generation who became the successor of the Dhami of the Than. It is because that the Dhami are the major constituent part of the continuity and reproduction of any Rajbansi society and Gramthan. It must be the reason that the local people worship at the tomb of the Dhami founded along with the Maharaj Than in every Gramthan as respect. For example, there are separate Than dedicated to the previous Dhami in every Maharaj Than such as Sunbarsi Maharaj, Katta Maharaj, and Ghurghura Maharaj Than.

Despite high ritual and spiritual recognition and respect of the local Dhami among the Rajbansi people, there are some historical narratives/reflections of the local people that show how the Dhami also had to face some practical challenges and rivalry; i.e. spiritual and political challenges/rivalry in the later periods. In this context, I discuss how a Dhami had to face such challenges or rivalry from their own counterparts or another Dhami in the spiritual realm on the one hand. On the other hand, they also had to face the challenges particularly by the politically dominant actor such as local Jimdar in the political realm.

Firstly, as the subsequent discussion shows that, it seems usual and continuous task or duty for the local Dhami to satisfy everyone's concerns or problems related to the sickness and protection from the supernatural beings and the wilds in the village. In other words, everyone in the village (especially the counterpart Dhami and the local Jimdar) could challenge the power of the main Dhami. Because the spiritual power of the Dhami was the major concern of the villagers as well as the local political agent called Jimdar in the adverse ecological condition and due to the fear of the widespread threat of wild animals and evils powers. So, it seems that the Dhami had to take the 'examination' of the counterpart Dhami, the villagers, the local Jimdar time and again. For example, Puran Rajbansi, himself the Pathura of Sunbarsi Maharaj Than located at Govindapur VDC, told me about a conflict or 'rivalry' that took place amongst the Dhami in the old days. The story or myth is about a struggle amongst the Dhami to gain the post of Dhami of the Sunbarsi Maharaj Than on the one hand. On the other hand, it also indicates how a Dhami would try to legitimize his spiritual power by competing the test or contest set by the local villagers in a particular historical time and context. Puran Rajbansi explained to me as:

We heard that there was a very big conflict or competition amongst the Dhami to get the post of the Dhami of the Sunbarsi Maharaj Than. It took place after the death of the original Dhimal Dhami. The Tharu Dhami came from the west side to capture and become the Dhami of this Than. The Dhimal Dhami also came from the upper side or Northern side. My maternal grandfather was also fighting for the post as being local Dhami. They were all-powerful spiritually. So, the local villagers set a rule of the competition or contest for them to become the next Dhami. As per the local people's rule, to become or win the post of Dhami of this Than, the contenders' hand and foot would be tied with strong rope; and whoever could untie it first through their Mantra/spell he would be the next Dhami of this Than. In this contest,

my maternal grandfather succeeded to untie the rope first and became the Dhami. This is how my maternal grandfather had acquired the post of the Dhami after the death of original Dhimal Dhami.

The above example indicates that there was conflict even amongst the spiritual actors to get the post of the Dhami. It means the post of the Dhami was not safe even from the challenge of another Dhami. The reason behind the rivalry or challenges from their counterpart might be linked with the social prestige and honor of the Dhami. As per the rule of the villagers, the Dhami had to prove themselves as superior to others to retain the post for the next time or year. It seems clear from the above story that whoever would become able to win the contest, he could hold the post and enjoy the social and ritual prestige and honor in the Rajbansi society. It also attests to the ritual importance and high ritual prestige of the Dhami among the Rajbansi people. In the above-mentioned ritual contest or rivalry, the local villagers seem to be the main organizer and their counterpart Dhami as the main challengers to prove them as a powerful Dhami. So, spiritual actors like Dhami also had to satisfy the villagers' concerns and face the counterpart's challenges together.

Dhami had to face not only the challenges from his counterpart Dhami. Rather he also had to face the challenge from the economically and politically dominant local elite or Jimdar. The local people of Amardaha and Govindapur VDC of Morang often told me about an event or conflict that took place between the local Jimdar called Ghamandi Jimdar belonging to the Dhokriya village of Amardaha VDC and the Dhami of Sunbarsi Maharaj. This event is about a struggle or 'rivalry' between the ritual and political leaders to gain their 'upper hand' in the society through the control or affiliation with the popular Gramthan in the Rajbansi society. The local people of the Govindapur VDC told me the following event as:

Once the Ghamandi Jimdar stopped the Majhi drummer<sup>2</sup> at the Dhokriya village located at the Amardaha VDC. The Majhi were heading for the Sunbarsi Maharaj Than located at the Govindapur VDC, for the celebration of Siruwa Pawani festival. The Ghamandi Jimdar challenged the Dhami because he wanted the Dhami to show his divine power. Then, knowing this challenge and disturbance to the drummer, the Dhami came to the Dhokriya village along with the Pathura and other some people. The Dhami asked the Jimdar why he stopped the Maharaj's drummer while there was going an important annual ritual Puja. Then, the Jimdar asked the Dhami to show 'something' whether he was a real or powerful Dhami or not. The Dhami understood the suspicious intention of the Jimdar that the Jimdar was not ready to accept his divine power. Then the Dhami spelled some mantra on his fist and sprinkled on the back of the Pathura to show his power. Then the Dhami made

2 The Majhi community used to and still play the drum on the special occasion of the major festival such as marriage and rituals such as Siruwa Pawani at Maharaj Than.

his Pathura go/enter through a small hole of a cowshed locally called Gwali. The hole was as small as just a hole of a bamboo. Having seen this amazing divine power of the Dhami at the moment, the Jimdar then accepted the power of the Dhami and let the Majhi go to the Sunbarsi Maharaj Than. But it was also heard that due to this nasty act of the Jimdar, his son was said to have vomited immediately. And people believed that it was caused by the Sunbarsi Maharaj due to the disrespect of him from the Ghamandi Jimdar.

In the above-mentioned story, we can see a conflict between two ritually and socially-politically dominant individuals; i.e. the Dhami and the local Jimdar. This event can be interpreted in many ways. But most importantly, this event shows that how a politically dominant local Jimdar seeks to legitimize his social, economic, and political power or domination in the Rajbansi society through the means of getting control over the Maharaj Than and the Dhami. For example, initially, the Jimdar stopped the traditional drum player called Majhi who was heading to Sunbarsi Maharaj Than for the annual festival celebration. The Jimdar knows well that the Majhi belonged to the Sunbarsi Maharaj Than and are going to play the drum for the annual festival celebration. He is himself the Jimdar of *Dhokriya* village located at the Amardaha. According to the local people, he was said to be like a 'king' among the Rajbansi people. The local people had to submit their annual land revenue at the Jimdar's house. In essence, it seems clear that both ritual and political actors seem to affiliate themselves with the Maharaj Than to legitimize their social, ritual, and political influence or to make their stronghold or ties over the people. The Jimdar seems to do so by way of his economic and political power and affiliation with the central state (Regmi, 2011[1978]). And the Dhami seems to do so by way of showing his historical, ritual (mythical) affiliation/power with the Maharaj Than.

Following the above-mentioned examples of conflict among the Dhami and the local Ghamandi Jimdar, I come to the second point to discuss how the local political actor called Jimdar became more dominant than the Dhami in public affairs among the Rajbansi people. There are certain things which led to the changes in relations or increased power of economically and politically powerful local individual like Jimdar in Tarai region during the 19th century or especially with the advent of the Rana and their extractive economic policies. It is because, during the mid-19th century, land became one of the most important sources of revenue for the Rana autocratic regime (Regmi, 2011 [1978]). There are some historical and ethnographic studies or evidence which suggest that there was the immense impact of the state's economic policy which also impacted the relationship between traditional actors and political actors; particularly, how the local Jimdar became dominant political agent/actor with the political support of the extractive central state during the Rana Regime (Regmi, 2011 [1978]; Guneratne, 2002; Rai, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Mahesh Chandra Regmi, a prominent Nepalese economic historian, reminds us that:

The introduction of the *Jimidari* system in the Tarai region during the early years of Rana rule was a measure of far-reaching importance in the context of tax collection and agricultural development during the nineteenth century... Functionaries, known as jimidars, were appointed in each *mouja* to collect taxes and promote land reclamation and settlement. (Regmi, 2011 [1978], p. 88)

According to Regmi, during the Rana period, Rana had especially given much more emphasis on the development of the eastern Tarai comprising especially present-day Jhapa, Morang, and Sunsari district called 'Morang.' It is because that Regmi further observes that

...The development of the Tarai was one of the main objectives of Rana's economic policy. Such development necessitated institutional arrangements to undertake and finance colonization schemes. The Rana government found it necessary to create a new class of landholding interests at the local level which would have sufficient incentive to provide such entrepreneurial talent and investment capital. (Regmi, 2011 [1978], p. 88-89)

The historical observation of M. C. Regmi (2011 [1978]) suggests that land became one of the most important sources of income generation for the Rana rulers through the tax collection. For the collection of the tax from the local people, the Rana certainly needed the local people or chief known as Jimdar through which they could get the needed revenue. It shows how the Jimdar became a powerful political actor in the local village or Mauja with his affiliation with the central state or due to the extractive economic policies of Rana. For example, in the above-mentioned observation of Regmi, the local political elite such as Jimdar are seemed to be authorized for tax collection from the local people on the one hand. On the other hand, they are also deemed to be authorized to 'promote land reclamation and settlement' in Tarai areas. Hence, the observation of Regmi also further attests to my argument that how the local elites were becoming more dominant among the Tarai Adivasi people and over their traditional/spiritual leaders as the global and national economic and environmental aspects became more dominant. The political conflicts that took place among the social and political actors also highlight how the social, political, and historical, environmental changes undergone among the Rajbansi society.

I take and discuss some historical experiences of the local Rajbansi people of Ghurghura Maharaj Than located at Bayerban. The historical experiences of local people also show how the local Jimdar became dominant in the Rajbansi society in the later period due to their affiliation with the central state. The local people told me that, in old days, they had to give/donate a certain share of their annual

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tractive nature of the central state and the history and dominant position of Jimdar system and landlord state in the Tarai, Nepal.

<sup>3</sup> See M.C. Regmi (2011 [1978]) for more detail about the ex-

crops as a donation called *Khan* to the Dhami and Pathura as a reward or wage for the annual Maharaj Than Puja. The Jimdar and Patwari used to collect such crops/grain from their subjects/*haruwa-charuwa*. For that, all *haruwa-charuwa* had to give a certain portion of their grains depending on their ability or capacity. The local people had to collect or submit the *Khan* to the Jimdar house when they would finish harvesting their crops in *Mangsir-Push*, or winter season. The Jimdar would order his *haruwa* or assistant to get or deliver the *khan* to the house of Dhami and *Kami*, the Pathura. This *Khan* collection system or practice also indicates the increased and dominant role of the local Jimdar family among the Rajbansi society. He would also collect and sponsor the materials needed for the annual worshipping at the Maharaj Than and organize the annual feast and festival/worship at the Than. From the above-mentioned experiences of local people also it becomes evident that the responsibility of the Jimdar for the collection and delivery of the *khan* for the traditional actors like Dhami and Pathura seem to be a great extent to social and political recognition of the power of the local Jimdar. It seems that having control over the ritual realm in the village does not necessarily mean that a Dhami could control the political realm and economic realm of the village or Mauja.

There are some events or examples which show how the local Jimdar would employ the new Dhami as the chief ritual actor of their respective Mauja due to their economic power and political affiliation with the central state. I take and discuss further an example or story narrated by a local man named Dahulal Rajbansi, himself the Pathura of Ghurghura Maharaj Than located at Bayerban VDC. He explained to me as:

In the old days or the time of the Rana system, in which the local Jimdar used to summon the different Dhami of their respective Than. They used to organize a contest for those Dhami in a fixed date, time, and place who were officiating to the local Than. The obvious motif of this contest would be to check the divine power of the Dhami that whether their power was working or not. In other words, Dhami were supposed to take an examination whether they were real or fake. When the contest began, the Jimdar used to give them a test like; one had to kill a tree by his Mantra, the spell. For example, a Jimdar would say that "Oh...Dhami, you kill this green tree by your Mantra." Then the Dhami had to kill the tree. The Dhami used to use Saldhup as incense and some flowers to spell their Mantra. There were no Agarbatti, as we have today. The Dhami used to chant their mantra on their palm thrice or seven times and sprinkle it over the tree. Then due to the Dhami's Mantra, all the green leaf of the tree would fall. Then, the Jimdar would say to another Dhami to make it green again; what they call it "Jilaunu." He would say "Lau Dhami, you make it green again or make it alive again." Then the Dhami had to make it live or green again. If he could make it green, the Dhami was considered to be passed on that test. Otherwise, other Dhami would take his place by dint of their strong mantra.

Interestingly, such a contest would take place in the winter season. So, Jimadar would also ask the Dhami to bring a big flood at the local river. Then the Dhami had to bring the flood/*Badi* in the local river/Khola. But another Dhami had to make it dry or *Sukkha* again. If those Dhami became successful at their contest, their post would be retained for the next time. Otherwise, other strong Dhami would take their place. It would mean that those Dhami would be selected to officiate the ritual at the Than who had the real divine power to placate and deal with the local Maharaj for the safety of the whole village and villagers. Because the responsibility of the Dhami would be supposed to control all kinds of ghosts and witches, *Sikari*, dead spirit, epidemic such as *Bhagwati*, *Haija*, *Phauti*, unnatural death of the people.

In the above-mentioned example, the Jimdar seems to be in a dominant or high position than the ritual actor Dhami. The Jimdar sets the rule of the contest for the Dhami to become or be chosen for the next Dhami of certain Gramthan of a *mauja*. It seems that the safety concern of the village or *mauja* also seems to have fallen over the shoulder of the local Jimdar. So, the Jimdar seems to recruit the Dhami as ritual agents who can placate and mediate between the local people and the deities. In other words, it seems that the Jimdar seems to have gained his upper hand than the Dhami in the latter example.

Most importantly, the time mentioned by Mr. Dahu Lal is important here to discuss a little bit. The contest discussed above takes place in the 'Rana period' in which the local Jimdar is seen in a politically powerful position. If we look at the historical documents, we come to know that it was the Rana time and their extractive economic policies which strengthened the social and political position of the local political elite mostly belonging to the Adivasi groups (Regmi, 2011[1978]). For example, in this context, Mahesh Chandra Regmi (2011 [1978]), observes that "The role of the jimidar system as an agricultural entrepreneur made toward the emergence of a new elite group in the Tarai region" (p. 89). The historical observation of Regmi (2011 [1978]) also clearly indicates that there was a far-reaching or immense impact of the economic policies of Rana on the local Adivasi people like Rajbansi. It also clearly attests the understanding of Dahulal Rajbansi, in which Jimdar seems to hold/organize the ritual contest to choose the powerful or best Dhami for officiating the respective Maharaj Than.

In this regards, I further discuss an example regarding the Sherpa society to make my argument more clear. Sherry Ortner (1989) discusses a ritual rivalry behind the founding of *Zhung* temple in *Zhung* valley between two spiritual actors named Lama Gombu and Dorje Zangbu. The Lama Gombu is a rich and famous local person. Young Dorje Zangbu was not very rich, but he was very clever. According to the story, the *Ashang*, Dorje Zangbu's mother's brother- who is a rich man in the local village, manages or organizes a ritual contest between Lama Gombu and Dorje Zangbu. The *Ashang* comes to know that his nephew has got a lot of spiritual power to

defeat Lama Gombu. And the Ashang also knows from his nephew, Dorje Zangbu that Lama Gombu has been following to kill his nephew for a long time (Ortner, 1989). So, as planned between them, the Ashang advised Dorje Zangbu to disguise himself as a beggar while taking part in a ritual context. During the ritual, Dorje Zangbu sits in the lowest status position and pretended to be a beggar. As the story continues, Lama Gombu comes along his servant and does Lokpar, an exorcism ritual, but he cannot “visualize/actualize” *Miwa*, the gods. The Ashang called upon another contestant or Lama on the stage saying “Lama Gombu, you are supposed to be such a powerful Lama, but you cannot do anything, shame on you. Whoever is more *dukta* (magically/spiritually effective), you or a certain *Lamaserwa* person (of the Lamaserwa clan), only under him will we place ourselves.” Then Ashang said to Lama Gombu “You sit down, and now you, beggar, get up” (Ortner, 1989, p. 64). In this contest, Dorje Zangbu wins, then Lama Gombu recognizes Dorje Zangbu, and was ashamed, and ran away with all his retinue.

In the above mentioned two examples of a struggle or ‘rivalry’ among the ritual actors/leaders in the Rajbansi and Sherpa contexts, following the ‘cultural schema’ of Sherry Ortner (1989), we can see some ‘protagonist’ and ‘antagonist’ contesting to show their affiliation with the shrine. There is a common feature in both Rajbansi and Sherpa society regarding the organizer of the ritual contest. For example, in the context of the Sherpa society, a locally rich man, like Jimdar of the Rajbansi context, organizes the ritual contest to take ‘examination’ between the two powerful spiritual actors. Like the Rajbansi case, it seems clear in Sherpa case also that, only the powerful ritual actor wins the contest and becomes the next ritual specialist for the protection of the village and the community. Because it is clear from the saying of the Ashang that he and the villagers would place themselves under those ritual actors who is spiritually powerful or “...more *Dukta* (magically/spiritually effective) person.” In this context, we can say that the post of the ritual actor or specialist was and is not an easy job. The ritual/spiritual actors in both societies were always challenged either by the villagers or the politically and economically dominant local persons. Because it seems equal that the protection from the supernatural power, evils, or ‘negative forces’ were the major concern in both Rajbansi and Sherpa societies.

Most importantly, it also becomes clear from both examples; i.e. the Rajbansi and Sherpa ritual contests that the ritual or spiritual realm/dominion does not mean that spiritual leaders could control the political and other social and economic realms of the Rajbansi or Sherpa society respectively. For example, the local Rajbansi people often told me that Dhams were not called on to settle the personal, familial quarrels, social conflict; rather it was the Deuniya who would judge or settle the conflicts in the past. But later on, the Jimdar became dominant in the political decision-making process in Rajbansi society. It is because that the ritual or spiritual power of the local Dhams or Lama in both Rajbansi and Sherpa societies concerned only with the cure or protection from the Bhut-Pret, epidemics,

or negative forces.

I would like to discuss a context regarding the past experience of Amrit Narayan Rajbansi, a 50-years old resident of Ghurghura village located at Bayerban VDC and himself a grandson of local Jimdar named Sundar Lal Rajbansi, to further attest my argument that how the local Jimdar succeeded to gain the ‘upper hand’ over the ritual as well and political actors like Deuniya and Dhams in later periods; i.e. Panchayat period. Amrit Narayan Rajbansi shared with me an event which is about how he agreed or accepted the proposal of the village members to become the Pujari of the Ghurghura Maharaj Than. Though his family was the main Pujari of the Ghurghura Maharaj Than who had established it at the present place. But later, his family had given up the Pujagiri for some reason (such as the presence of hill immigrants, their interference, political-economic interests of these and other local people). There were other several Pujari after his family gave up the Pujagiri or before his tenure as a Pujari. The context and issue that I wanted to meet Amrit Rajbansi and know from him were all about the ritual practice of ‘pig sacrifice’ at the Ghurghura Maharaj Than. It is because that the Dhams of Ghurghura Maharaj Than, belonging to Dhimal ethnic group, had told me that there was a ritual practice of pig sacrifice at the Ghurghura Maharaj Than even some time ago. But it was abandoned in the later period. Amrit Rajbansi also accepted this fact that there was a practice of pig sacrifice and even the *Raksi*/liquor at the Ghurghura Maharaj Than.<sup>4</sup> But the matter was that the local Rajbansi consider them as belonging to the Hindu religious groups; a *Kshatriya* descent. According to them, chickens and pigs are not allowed to eat, rear, and even to touch in their family and society. So, when I met him, Amrit Narayan Rajbansi told me the following event as:

Yes, it was me, and from my tenure as a chairperson of the Puja Samiti, who initiated to stop pig sacrifice and offering the *Raksi* at the Ghurghura Maharaj Than. Because, when I was asked to take the post of chairperson of the Puja committee after my father gave up the Pujagiri post, I put a condition to the villagers. I said to them if I were to take the position of Pujagiri, I would not allow giving pig sacrifice at the Maharaj Than. Thus we consulted with the Dhams also. The Dhams also agreed to my proposal and suggested we sacrifice pigeons and cash

4 There is still a practice of giving a sacrifice of a chicken called Challa and *Raksi*/liquor at the Sunbarsi Maharaj Than located at Govindapur VDC, Morang; especially at the Than of Madhura deity on the occasion of Athwari Puja which is observed after one week of the main Nisi Puja [see Rai, B. 2016, Appendix-1 for more detail]. I did observe the same offering ritual at the Dhanpal Maharaj Than (a branch of Dhanpal Maharaj originally located at Kadamaha VDC, Morang) located at the Sakhwa Than village located at the Darbesa VDC, Morang; on the occasion of Siruwa Pawani observed on 13 April 2016. But the Dhams of later Gramthan offered one challa and *raksi* to the Than of the forefather of the Dhams. According to the local people, there were originally Dhimal Dhams who used to sacrifice pigs to the local deities [Field note, 13 April 2016].

instead of pigs<sup>5</sup>.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that the Jimdar family seems to have succeeded to capture the dominant position in the decision-making process in the later period; i.e. changes in the economic-political contexts in Tarai with the advent of the Rana-Panchayat period.

The above historical experience and narration of Amrit Rajbansi show how the Dhami had lost their ritual status or 'upper hand' in course of time along with the changed or transformation in social, political, and economic and environmental factors took place across the Tarai region. In other words, Amrit Rajbansi's experience shows how the local Jimdar family became more dominant in the political realm and how such decision-making process fell under the jurisdiction of newly formed 'Puja Committee' after the introduction of the multiparty democracy, and the related ritual ceremony and annual festival Puja and safety issues among the Rajbansi society in the later period; i.e. through Rana time to even till Panchayat period.

In sum, following the argument of Guneratne (1999) and Regmi (2011 [1978]), it can be argued that as long as the prevalence of the threats from supernatural beings and the wilds prevailed upon the Rajbansi society, so long the prestige and importance of the Dhami remained among the local Rajbansi people. Similarly, it was the extractive economic policies that helped create the new political elite like the Jimdar in the local village who later dominated the village and decision making process/practice of the local villagers. It also shows how the wider and central extractive economic policies of the state impacted on the historical relationship between the traditional/ritual actors and the new political elites called Jimdar. If we link it with the Sherpa case also, it was the global phenomenon that directly affected the social, political, and economic aspects of the Rajbansi people. It is because that, taking the above example, we may raise the question here: Why the local Jimdar family did not raise the issue of pig sacrifice and Raksi offering in the beginning or in the past at the same Maharaj Than? It is an interesting question or issue to be discussed here. In this regard, Mr. Srimatya Dhimal, the Dhami of the Ghurghura Maharaj Than, told me that it was in the old days when Dhami (e.g., his forefather) were ritually powerful and his wishes or decision would be the final in the ritual realm or in the ritual performance at the Gramthan. And it was the Dhami who could make the village safe from the threats of different natural as well as supernatural beings by way of his personal affiliation with the Maharaj. Dhami might inflict the whole village if proper respect did not pay or deliver to him by the villagers. The Dhami had the sole power of whether to offer pigs or not. Because in the above-mentioned example the Dhami

belongs to the Dhimal ethnic group and the Dhimal rear and eat the pork. So, it does not seem to be abnormal ritual practice for the Dhimal Dhami to offer the pork to the Gramthan. Through the historical experience of Srimatya Dhimal also, it seems that the prestigious position of the Dhami was gradually challenged by the local Jimdar. And in the long course of time or over the century, the antagonist; i.e. Jimdar took over Dhami or succeeded to gain his 'upper hand' among the Rajbansi society due to the economic policies of the central state (Regmi, 2011 [1978]) and the environmental changes or transformation in Tarai (Guneraten, 1999).

## Conclusion

Maharaj Than is a constituent part of every Rajbanshi village. Through the Maharaj Than, we can peep into the different dimensions of Rajbanshi society, and the conflict between the ritual actors such as Dhami and the politically-economically dominant actors, the landlord called *Jimdar* over who controls the Gramthan so as to legitimize their social and political dominance is one of the most important dimension. It is because that the Gramthan possesses 'a great virtue' among the Rajbanshi as well (Ortner, 1989). In this regard, this paper offers a new insight to look at the ritual and political 'rivalry' between the Dhami and the Jimdar in the Tarai context. In other words, it offers an understanding that how the Gramthan is embedded in the power relations, how it is economically and politically entangled within a certain class or dominant group's power and interests.

Ritual leader has not always been successful to retain their social and ritual power and dominance in the Rajbanshi and other Tarai people due to the changed social, economic, political and environmental contexts. In this sense, this paper adds to our knowledge and understanding about the historical, economic, and political factors and the 'material transformation' that took place after the 1950s; i.e. after the malaria eradication and land holding system in Tarai Nepal as responsible factors behind how the politically dominant groups or person called Jimdar became dominant in the Rajbansi society over the ritual actors such as Dhami and other traditional leaders in general. This paper offered some of such historical glimpses on how such event took place, its consequences along with the changed Tarai environment and economic-political transformations.

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5 But when I talked to Srimatya Dhimal, the Dhami of the Ghurghura Maharaj Than, he lamented over the abandoned traditional practices. For example, he was particularly dissatisfied with the declined respect of the Dhami and the Maharaj Than. There is no such respect for the Dhami and enough sacrifice to the Maharaj Than as compared to the previous time. He told me that people have been greedy than ever.

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