

Religion and Socio-Political Dynamics in Nepali History: Analyzing Consciousness, Class, and State Power

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophy of Pasupata Shaivism and its socio-political impact on Nepali history, focusing on the relationship between ideology, class hierarchy, and state power. Central to this philosophy is the transactional relationship between consciousness and matter, where human interaction with the world through the five senses shapes the mind, influenced by karma (human actions). This dynamic interplay suggests that matter and consciousness are interdependent, reflecting a deeper principle of contradiction—where the existence of an entity relies on the coexistence of opposing conditions. The study argues that Pasupata Shaivism's egalitarian principles, emphasizing collective well-being, spiritual equality, and shared resources, historically strengthened the Nepali state and fostered social cohesion. In contrast, periods dominated by Dharmasastra traditions, which advocated for private property and caste hierarchies, exacerbated class divisions and state fragility. Using primary sources such as inscriptions, genealogies, and religious texts, along with secondary analyses, the paper explores the socio-political implications of Pasupata Shaivism's focus on material conditions (dravyani), skills and knowledge (guna), and human actions (karma). Findings highlight how Shaivism supported peasants and workers, promoting social harmony and challenging exploitative systems, while Smriti-based frameworks concentrated wealth and power among elites. The paper concludes that Pasupata Shaivism offers an indigenous framework for addressing social inequalities and fostering equitable governance.

Key words: Religion, class, philosophy, state, society

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Introduction

Nepal's history is deeply influenced by Shaivism, shaping its socio-political and cultural development. Genealogies, inscriptions, and oral traditions highlight Shaivism as a key framework for understanding human interactions, governance, and social organization. Central to this worldview is Vaiseshika philosophy, which emphasizes the transactional relationship between consciousness and matter,

influencing perception and action. This study uses a textual analytical approach to explore the interplay between ideology, class dynamics, and power. Shaivism's principles of *sahastitva* (coexistence) and *samuhikta* (collectivism) have historically fostered social harmony and egalitarian values among Nepali communities.

Francis Buchanan Hamilton who visited Nepal in 1802-1803 AD writes that the Brahmins were *Jayurvedi* (Yajur vedi) worshipping the mother goddess 'following chiefly the doctrines of the books called *tantras* (Hamilton, 1819, pp. 16–17). To this day, the main Veda of the Nepalis is *Shukla Yajurveda* from where emanates their beliefs and rituals. For instance, erecting *yupa* (sacrificial pillar or *maulo*) and offering animal sacrifices to mother goddess (*devi*) is a Vedic tradition that is followed by almost every Nepali ethnic group. Similarly, the worship of *devi*, rooted in *Rigvedic* hymns such as the *Devi Sukta* and *Ratri Sukta*, underscores a collective ethos of honoring nature's sustenance and transformative power (*Rig Veda*, 10.125, 10.12).

Anthropological studies suggests Shaivism's prevalence among *Khas Arya* communities (Brahman, Thakuri, Chetri, and *Dasnami Sanyasi*), as well as *Janajati* groups such as *Magars*, *Gurungs*, *Newars*, and *Kirats*, etc, often mediated by *pujari* (priests) or *tantric dhami-jhankris* (healers) (Bista, 1991; Tiwari, 2001). Such works show the existence of shamanic tantricism among the *Newars* (Tiwari, 2001), *Gurungs* (Gurung, 2019), and *Kirats* (Chemjong, 2003). The philosophical and socio-political dimensions of Shaivism have attracted diverse scholarly interpretations, offering critical insights into its egalitarian potential and its role in resisting hierarchical societies. John Campbell Oman (1905) highlights the egalitarian and rational aspects of Shaivism, emphasizing how ancient sages, as followers of *Shiva*, resisted caste hierarchies and promoted logical reasoning. R.C. Majumdar (2017) complements this view by noting the rationalism inherent in ancient Indian thought, as exemplified by the *Rigvedic* assertion that life originated in water. He criticizes the later dominance of *Vedanta* philosophy and *Dharmasutras* for introducing pessimism and reinforcing caste-based exploitation.

Dharmendranath Sastri (1976) identifies a philosophical dichotomy in South Asian traditions, specifically between idealism and materialism. He underscores the *Vaisheshika* philosophy's focus on the creative and positive aspects of the material world. Despite this, Sastri does not delve into the *Vaisheshika* concept of contradiction, which is central to understanding its dialectical nature. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (1959) argues that *Shiva* and *devi* worship, often expressed through *Tantric* practices, is deeply rooted in *Lokayata*—a materialistic philosophy linked to agricultural production and the creation of commodities. Chattopadhyaya notes the dialectical relationship between knowledge and matter but overlooks the explicit notion of contradiction and class struggle within *Tantric* traditions. Richard King (1999) and Arun Shourie (1979) analyze *Vedanta* philosophy as otherworldly, serving the ruling elite by legitimizing the caste system. King focuses on *Vaisheshika*'s rationalism and its assertion that existence persists beyond human perception, yet he, too, neglects the concept of contradiction. Shourie examines how *Vedanta* provides ideological consent for exploitation, perpetuating caste-based hierarchies through its idealism.

The existing scholarship acknowledges Shaivism's rational and egalitarian dimensions but fails to engage with the concept of contradiction in Vaishesika philosophy. Moreover, while there is recognition of Shaivism's resistance to caste hierarchies, its specific socio-political implications in Nepal remain underexplored. This study bridges these gaps by employing a textual analytical approach to analyze Shaivism's dialectical philosophy and its role in shaping Nepal's socio-political history. This study has following objectives:- to analyze the core philosophical tenets of Pasupata Shaivism, Vedanta, Sankhya and Buddhism and investigate how these ideas influenced social relations and governance in historical Nepal, and to examine the socio-political impact of Pasupata Shaivism's egalitarian values in fostering social harmony and challenging caste hierarchies, comparing its role to Dharmasastra-based traditions in the consolidation or fragmentation of state power. Here is an attempt to explore these core research questions:- how did the philosophical principles of Vaishesika, Vedanta, Sankhya and Buddhism influence social hierarchy and governance in Nepal? Moreover, what were the socio-political implications of Pasupata Shaivism in promoting egalitarian values and challenging caste-based stratification, and how did it compare to Dharmasastra-based traditions in shaping the unity and fragility of the Nepali state?

By integrating Vaisheshika's transactional framework of matter and consciousness with its emphasis on idea of contradiction, the study provides a nuanced understanding of Shaivism's potential to challenge exploitation and promote egalitarianism. Moreover, it highlights the role of the Dharmasastras in fostering social division and weakening the state's unity.

Methodology

This research employs a textual analytical approach to examine the philosophy and socio-political dimensions of Shaivism in Nepal's historical context. The study draws on ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts to understand how the interplay between matter (*dravya*), knowledge (*guna*), and human actions (*karma*) shaped societal structures, as articulated in Vaishesika and Pasupata philosophies. The primary texts analyzed include ancient Hindu scriptures such as the *Vaishesika Sutra*, *Rigveda*, *Atharva Veda*, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, *Pasupata Sutra*, *Mahanirvana tantra*, *Yoga Vasistha*, *Sankhya Karika*, *Vasistha Dharmasutra*, and *Astavakra Gita*. Additionally, Buddhist texts like the *Milinda Panha*, and *Majhima Nikaya* provide insights into alternative frameworks of socio-political systems. Historical texts such as the Lichhavi inscriptions, the legal code of Jayasthiti Malla (fourteenth century), and the *Muluki Ain* of 1853-54 AD are used to trace the evolution of legal and social hierarchy in Nepal.

The Nepali word for philosophy, *darsan*, originates from the Sanskrit root *dris*, meaning, "Seen" or "experienced," signifying knowledge gained through direct observation. The Vaishesika Sutra posits that socio-economic conditions—*dravya* (matter), *guna* (knowledge/skill), and *karma* (human actions)—govern human life (Sinha, 1923, pp. 22–30). Kaundinya in the Pasupata Sutra and Kautilya in the Arthasastra emphasize the role of material conditions in shaping human needs and desires (Chakroborti, 1970, pp. 20, 42, 50-51; Shamasastri, 1951, p. 12). This study explores how caste hierarchies were legitimized in Nepal, noting that Vaishnava Dharmasastras reinforced caste and private property, while

Shaiva texts advocated egalitarianism and meritocracy. Through a textual analysis, the study examines the interplay of material conditions, ideology, and class dynamics in historical Nepal, contrasting the caste-supporting Vaishnava philosophy with the merit-based Shaiva approach. It also reflects on how these philosophical frameworks shaped socio-economic realities and human agency in Nepal's history.

Results

The research provides significant insights into the socio-economic, religious, and legal evolution of Nepal from the Licchavi period to the 19th century, focusing on the interplay between governance, religious influence, and societal structures. The formation of the ancient Nepali state was based on cooperation among peasants, traders, and artisans, as reflected in the Rigveda's endorsement of *ganarajya* (republican states) and *Bhujya* states, emphasizing collective welfare. Early societies like the Kiratas fostered cooperative institutions such as *samitis* or *chumlung*, where resources were shared for the collective benefit. Shaiva traditions, including Kashyap Rishi's *Vaisesika Sutra*, emphasized justice and collective welfare (Sinha, 1923, pp. 22–30), while the *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda* advocated for economic prosperity, equality, and accessible education as essential components of social harmony.

During the Kirata and Licchavi periods (1700 BC–8th century AD), Shaivism dominated Nepal, with many Shiva lingas found in the Kathmandu Valley (Vajracharya, 1996, p. 33). The Licchavi rulers implemented a structured taxation system but simultaneously issued land grants and tax exemptions for elites, exacerbating economic disparities (Vajracharya, 1996, pp. 91–93). The caste system, introduced during this period, is documented in the *Anantalingeswor* inscription of Narendradeva (656–665 AD), which mentions Brahmana and Chandala castes (Vajracharya, 1996, p. 487). The formalization of caste hierarchies occurred during the Malla period under Jayasthiti Malla (1370–1395 AD), who institutionalized caste divisions based on *Manu Smriti* and *Narada Smriti* (Acharya & Naraharinath, 2004, p. 90). In the 13th century, Raja Krachalla introduced *dharmastras* in the Khasa kingdom of western Nepal, as evidenced by a 1223 AD copper plate inscription from Sui in Kumaon (Adhikary, 1997, pp. 159–163).

The introduction of private landholding during the Licchavi period marked a significant socio-economic shift (Vajracharya & Malla, 1985, pp. 122–123). By the 16th century, land became a tradable asset, enriching merchants and nobles while marginalizing lower castes (M. C. Regmi, 1999, pp. 21–22). Although the Gorkhali rulers sought legal reforms, caste hierarchies and land commoditization continued to perpetuate resource inequalities. The *Muluki Ain* of 1854 AD institutionalized caste-based stratification, dividing people into categories such as *Tagadhari* (sacred thread wearers), *Namasinya Matwali* (non-enslavable alcohol drinkers), *Masinya Matwali* (enslavable alcohol drinkers), and untouchables (Hofer, 2004, p. 10). These provisions further restricted peasants and workers from accessing resources and opportunities, reinforcing socio-economic disparities.

Throughout Nepalese history, religion and governance have shaped societal frameworks. The Kirata period, with its semi-egalitarian society and Shaivism, promoted social equity. During the Licchavi period, Shaivism fostered inter-religious harmony, while Vaishnavism in the Malla and Rana periods reinforced caste-based stratification and elite power. This study highlights how these historical religious

and administrative policies continue to impact contemporary Nepali society, contributing to persistent social inequalities.

Discussion

In ancient Nepal, governance was closely linked with religion, fostering cooperation and collective welfare. However, during the medieval period, caste hierarchies, land commoditization, and elite-driven policies intensified socio-economic inequalities. Key philosophical schools—Sankhya, Vedanta, Buddhism, and Vaishesika—shaped governance, justice, and social order. Vedanta and Sankhya often reinforced elite power and supported private property, while Buddhist teachings sought to alleviate sufferings but maintained the status quo, attributing the lower classes' poverty to past-life sins. In contrast, Vaishesika traditions promoted inclusivity, collective welfare, and ethical governance, advocating for a more egalitarian approach to state policies.

Socio-Political and Economic Dimensions of South Asian Philosophies

Nepalis refer to philosophy as *darsan*, a term derived from *dris*, meaning, "to see." Thus, *darsan* signifies knowledge gained through observation and experience, reflecting a deep connection between philosophical inquiry and practical understanding of life and existence. This approach underscores the significance of observation and lived experience in forming knowledge. Vaishesika theory elaborates on the transactional relationship between *chetana* (consciousness or ideas) and *dravya* (matter), positing that human perception and cognition are shaped by the interaction of the five senses with the *manas* (brain). These interactions allow the *manas* (mental framework) to process and interpret matter, thus constructing the *samsara* (world) through human actions (*karma*) and engagement with matter. In turn, *chetana* influences intentions and actions, demonstrating the reciprocal influence between matter and consciousness (Shastri, 1976, p. 36). This dynamic reinforces the idea that human understanding is not solely abstract but grounded in the sensory and experiential engagement with the world, offering a comprehensive framework for interpreting the complexities of existence.

Kaundinya Rishi, in his *Pasupata Sutra*, identifies cause, effect, yoga, methodology, and *dukhanta* (cessation of pain and suffering) as key categories of knowledge. He defines *yoga* as the process of learning, inquiry, and meditation, emphasizing that through proper methodology, knowledge can be attained to address worldly problems (Chakroborti, 1970, pp. 19-20). The sources of knowledge include *anubhuti* (experience and intellectual works) and *anuman* (inference). These enable humans to analyze and reason about various topics. As beings bound by the principle of cause and effect, human thoughts and needs are shaped by their material conditions. This awareness of the body and matter highlights the interconnectedness of consciousness and the material world (Chakroborti, 1970, pp. 20-24).

Kashyapa, also known as Kannada or Uluka Rishi, in his Vaishesika *Sutra* defines *dharma* as actions that lead to the supreme good of all beings and the cessation of pain, emphasizing the pursuit of

knowledge that benefits humanity (Sinha, 1923, p. 5). He views the problems of *samsara* (the material world) as stemming from ignorance, with the solution lying in the understanding of matter, which reveals the underlying systems and relationships of the world (Sinha, 1923, pp. 1-3). The concept of causality, or cause and effect, is explained through two categories: matter (*dravyani*) and its attributes or qualities (*guna*), which manifest as products or forms. The essence of matter and its attributes is distinct; much like the essence of cloth differs from that of thread. This theory asserts that reality is ever-changing, as nothing is permanent (Shastri, 1976, p. 17).

The knowledge of matter encompasses three key aspects: *dravyani* (matter or economy), *guna* (attributes such as knowledge and skills), and *karma* (activities or professions). The primary forms of matter include earth, water, air, fire (or heat), space, time, directions, and soul. The soul, according to Kashyapa, is composed of light made up of particles (*paramanu*), making it a form of matter (Sinha, 1923, pp. 17-18). Except for the soul and directions, all forms of matter possess characteristics such as *roopa* (color or form), *rasa* (taste), *gandha* (smell), and *sparsa* (tactile sensation). These characteristics contribute to human experiences of comfort, happiness, sorrow, and suffering. Additionally, phenomena like conjunction and disjunction, desire, and hatred are also influenced by the inherent qualities of matter (Sinha, 1923, pp. 17-18). Humans experience all these things owing to the presence of man or mind whose power are motion, memory, and flexibility (Jha, 1916, p. 23).

Matter inherently possesses qualities that are not distinct but share common characteristics, providing the substrate for attributes to manifest, which are experienced through sensory perception (Sinha, 1923, p. 18). Karma, or activity, operates independently from matter, acting as a force that causes matter to change but without any intrinsic qualities or attributes. It is through action that conjunction (unity) and disjunction (separation) arise, influencing the dynamics of human interaction (Sinha, 1923, p. 142).

Such ideas of Kashyapa Rishi is based on his main concept of contradiction that is inherent in a framework or one thing where the existence and identity of a thing or a category is dependent on the co-existence of two conditions. These are opposites of each other but they are dependent on each other—dependent on each other in tension (Sinha, 1923, pp. 214-218). Thus, its internal oppositions always determine a thing. Opposing forces integrate through conflict in the process of development. Unity is relative, as it is temporary and shaped by continuous struggle. The world operates on the principle of contradiction, where conflict serves as the foundation for change and progress (Sinha, 1923, pp. 143). Such ideas enable us to understand societal contradictions and class struggles, as well as the relationship between society and nature. Owing to the contradiction of matter and activity, material conditions generate conflict due to uneven distribution and exploitation. Conjunction and disjunction are the effects of the action upon matter. When matter interacts under the influence of action, it leads to either a union or separation, depending on the nature of the force or action involved.

Kashyapa develops his concept of class based on the idea of contradiction, asserting that class can only exist in relation to other classes. An individual's karma—their activities and profession—and

characteristics are not personal attributes but are instead tied to their class (Sinha, 1923, pp. 25-29, 38-42). Kashyapa further posits that only time and space are free from class distinctions, while all material entities, including humans, belong to one class or another (Sinha, 1923, p. 18). The tension and competition among classes lead to struggles as they contend for dominance and resources (Sinha, 1923, p. 19). This perspective aligns with descriptions found in Vedic literature and Kautilya's Arthashastra, which depict a society organised into four varnas based on profession: Brahmins (intellectuals and sages), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (peasants and artisans).

Kashyap Rishi stresses the importance of justice and collective welfare (Sinha, 1923, pp. 22–30). He argues that human minds are influenced by doubt, aversion, greed, and desire, which can lead to undesirable or harmful actions (Sinha, 1923, pp. 6-8). Therefore, he emphasized the need for a systematic approach to social welfare to prevent such negative actions and to guide human activities in an orderly and constructive manner (Sinha, 1923, pp. 6-8).

Viswamitra and Bharadvaja, advocated for the welfare, prosperity, security, and health of all people (Rigveda 3.1.19, 22; 6.1.12–13). Bharadvaja emphasized the importance of economic prosperity for sustaining a strong state and army (Rigveda 6.1.2–3) and advocated for shared access to resources such as food, cattle, and education (Rigveda 6.14; Atharvaveda 6.64.1). Similarly, Viswamitra envisioned a society where equality prevailed in behavior, words, and thoughts (Rigveda 10.191.2).

The *Atharvaveda* underscores foundational principles of equality and unity within society. It advocates for accessible education as a critical factor for ensuring equality (Atharvaveda 6.64.1). It discourages jealousy and promotes harmonious relationships among individuals (Atharvaveda 3.30.2–3). Respect for parents, intellectuals, and elders is highlighted as essential for societal harmony (Atharvaveda 3.30.5). Furthermore, it warns that discrimination between social classes disrupts societal organization and unity. It suggests that removing contradictions and inequalities is essential for fostering collective well-being (Atharvaveda 6.94.1). The *Rigveda* also introduces the concept of a welfare state, termed *bhaujya*, which underscores the state's responsibility to direct production and ensure health and education for all (Rigveda 5.66.6).

Similarly, Kautilya in his Arthashastra says that the state must ensure economic prosperity, security, and social welfare. Everybody should be able to use the land by paying taxes to the state. The state should also regulate the prices of goods in the market. Similarly, the state must take responsibility for the education and health of children, as well as the care of the elderly, the disabled, and those who are mentally ill (Shamasastri, 1951). This reflects an ancient understanding of governance that prioritizes social welfare and public goods, laying the groundwork for an inclusive and equitable society.

During medieval times, Shaiva scholars composed *tantras* to make their philosophical teachings accessible to the common people. The *Mahanirvana Tantra* states that, since the world is filled with corruption, deceit, and exploitation, its teachings aim for the well-being of all humans (Avalon, 1953, pp.

11–13). It emphasizes that notions of purity and impurity should not be based on caste distinctions, and all individuals should partake in food consecrated to Sadashiva, who is regarded as Brahma, the lord of intellect (Avalon, 1953, p. 51).

The tantra advocates for various social welfare measures, such as digging water tanks, constructing roadside rest houses, planting trees, building bridges over rivers, and providing donations to the poor (Avalon, 1953, p. 222). It emphasizes that rulers should not covet the wealth of their people nor impose excessive taxes. Instead, they are responsible for the welfare of children, orphans, the mentally ill, the elderly, and persons with disabilities (Avalon, 1953, pp. 229-231). Furthermore, the *Mahanirvana Tantra* specifies that only essential commodities, such as food grains, necessary goods, and animals, should be traded, prohibiting the sale of land and human beings (Avalon, 1953, p. 231). It rejects caste-based distinctions in matters of eating, drinking, and marriage, promoting social inclusivity and equality (Avalon, 1953, p. 233).

In contrast to the Shaiva philosophy, Vasistha Rishi, in his *Yoga Vasistha*, asserts that knowledge originates from the soul, which governs the world; therefore, an individual must cultivate awareness of their knowledge and skills (Aiyar, 2016, pp. 45–46). However, pride, arising from worldly attachments, hinders one from attaining *nirvana*—freedom from desires and attachments. The world is considered an illusion (*maya*), in which humans experience both happiness and suffering. Without achieving *nirvana*, they remain trapped in the cycle of birth and rebirth (Aiyar, 2016, pp. 61-65). Vasistha emphasizes that individuals must renounce pride and perform their duties (*karma*), disregarding personal pain and pleasure (Aiyar, 2016, pp. 124-125).

In the *Astavakra Gita*, Astavakra Rishi emphasizes the importance of transcending materialism and recognizing one's true nature as pure consciousness, rather than as a material being (Richards, 2019, p. 5). He advocates for contentment with one's present state, cautioning that desires entrap individuals in the cycle of worldly existence (Richard, 2019, p. 82). Similarly, Kapila Muni's *Sankhya Karika* presents a dualistic framework that differentiates between *Purusha* (consciousness) and *Prakriti* (matter), and that liberation from suffering is attained through the knowledge of these two distinct entities.

Kapila asserts that knowledge arises from direct experience, logical inference, and scholarly teachings (Sinha, 1915, pp. 3–4). Kapila also highlights that dispositions like virtue, knowledge, and power are inherent and shaped by experience, with *Buddhi* (intellect) guiding actions, while the body serves as the medium for experiencing them (Sinha, 1915, p. 36). His concept of *Satkaryavada* posits that the effect preexists in the cause, with *Prakriti* as the ultimate source of all material effects, while *Purusha* remains a detached observer (Sinha, 1915, pp. 37-38). This suggests that human actions are limited in their ability to alter one's condition, as *Purusha* is unaffected by changes in *Prakriti*.

Similarly, Gautama Buddha's teachings deny contradiction in society by emphasizing interdependence and mutual co-existence. He asserted that no singular or independent entity exists; rather,

every being is composed of interconnected parts such as feelings, consciousness, and experiences, which mutually influence each other in a dynamic process (Nanissara, 2006, pp. 50–51). Nagasena, a Buddhist scholar of the 2nd century BC, further emphasized in his *Milindapanha* that every being serves as a cause for the existence of another, reinforcing the notion of mutual reliance and interdependence (Nanissara, 2006, p. 53). These concepts, by focusing on harmony and interdependence rather than contradiction and conflict, legitimize social hierarchy and justify the exploitation of lower classes by promoting acceptance of existing social hierarchy rather than challenging them.

The seventh Mandala of the Rigveda reflects Vedantic tendencies aimed at consolidating priestly and royal power through religious and economic strategies. Vasistha Rishi asserts that Agni, the fire god, bestows wealth upon kings and nobles, reinforcing their authority and ensuring prosperity, thus establishing a divine justification for the socio-political hierarchy (Rigveda 7:5.9). He emphasizes that Agni should enrich rulers and nobles to enable them to make generous offerings to priests, thereby fostering a mutually beneficial alliance between the ruling and priestly classes (Rigveda 7.1.23–25). Furthermore, Vasistha advised priests to employ flattery and praise when addressing rulers, highlighting the instrumental role of rhetoric in maintaining their influence and securing wealth (Rigveda 7.16.9–12). Traders and merchants (*Panis*) are depicted as a vital source of wealth for priests, illustrating an economic system that reinforced the dependence of religious institutions on commercial activities and further legitimized social stratification (Rigveda 8.66.10; 10.108.7–11).

In his Vasistha Dharmasutra, a systematic socio-economic order is presented, wherein the concept of Varna Ashrama Dharma (division of professions) is interpreted as a rigid caste system. Vasistha explicitly forbids Brahmanas and Kshatriyas from marrying the daughters of Shudras, warning that such unions lead to the degradation of family lineage and result in punishment in the afterlife (Vasistha 1:27). The duties of Shudras are confined to agriculture and artisanal work, positioning them in perpetual service to the higher castes, thereby institutionalizing economic and social subordination (Vasistha 2:18–20).

Additionally, Vasistha Rishi's teachings introduce a well-defined notion of private property, grounded in principles of ownership, documentation, and witness testimony (Vasistha 16:10, 13). Land and houses are identified as the primary forms of property, with wealth being acquired through inheritance, purchase, dowry, charitable gifts (*dana*), offerings (*dakshina*), trade profits, and labor earnings (Vasistha 16:16). The inheritance system prioritizes patrilineal succession, reinforcing patriarchy and social stability by emphasizing the necessity of having a son for both worldly and spiritual continuity. A sonless man, according to Vasistha, is denied access to heaven and has no recognized status in society (Vasistha 17:2), highlighting the deeply entrenched link between property, social standing, and religious salvation.

According to Vasistha, a daughter is entitled only to the dowry brought by her mother at the time of marriage and holds no right to inherit her father's property, thereby reinforcing gendered economic exclusion (Vasistha 17:46). He further prescribes that a girl must be married before menstruation, warning that any delay would bring sin upon her father (Vasistha 17:70). Women are to remain under male

guardianship throughout their lives—first under their father, then their husband, and finally their sons—denying them autonomy and reinforcing their dependence within the patriarchal order (Vasistha 5:1–2).

Vasistha's Dharmasutra constructs a social reality in which caste and gender roles are divinely ordained duties, the text obscures the arbitrary and constructed nature of social stratification, legitimizing the dominance of upper castes through symbolic violence (Vasistha 17:2, 46, 70). Later religious texts such as Manu Smriti, Narada Smriti and Vishnu Smriti repeat and follow the legal codes of Vasistha. Similarly, Buddha in the Balpandita Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya reinforces social stratification by asserting that Chandala (public executioners and leather workers), Nishada (hunters, butchers, and fishermen), Vena (bamboo workers), Rathakara (carpenters), and Pukusa (sanitation workers) are of low birth and suffer poverty as a consequence of sins committed in past lives. They are described as ugly and harmful to others both physically and through harsh words, and are destined for hell after death (Majjhima Nikaya, 129). This religious narrative further reinforces the notion that social inequality is a reflection of divine justice, legitimizing the continued economic and social dominance of the upper castes while rationalizing the suffering of the lower castes because of their karmic actions.

Caste, Philosophy, and Social Order in historical Nepal

In ancient times, state formation in Nepal was deeply rooted in the principles of mutual co-existence and cooperation among peasants, traders, and artisans. The Rigveda highlights the significance of ganarajya (republican states) and Bhaujya states as ideal models for ensuring collective welfare and defense. Tribal societies, such as the Kiratas, operated on cooperation and collective responsibility, as evidenced by institutions like the samitis or chumlung (Niraula & Chetri, 2080, pp. 58, 71). Revenues collected from peasants and traders were allocated for collective welfare and administration. While rulers and priests received a share of these resources, society during this era remained largely semi-egalitarian, reflected in the absence of extravagant palaces in Harappan cities. Similarly, we find no such big palaces belonging to Kirata kings.

Nepali oral traditions indicate that society was once divided into Jana, a Vedic term referring to tribes sharing common habitation and culture. The introduction of dharmasastras and the transformation of professions into castes fragmented tribal unity. This process eroded the Shaiva culture of samuhikta (collectivism), samanata (equality), and sahaastiva (mutual co-existence) among the Nepalis (Regmi, 1999, p. 87). Caste endogamy and clan exogamy played a crucial role in shaping the caste system by ensuring social stratification and maintaining occupational heredity. By restricting marriage within the same caste while allowing it outside the clan, caste identities were reinforced and rigid social boundaries were maintained, further entrenching the class division of the society. Caste divisions helped the rulers maintain control by preventing collective resistance to private property and their authoritarian rule.

During the Kirata and Licchavi periods (1st–8th century AD), Shaivism was the predominant religious force in Nepal, as evidenced by the widespread presence of Shiva lingas in the Kathmandu Valley

(Vajracharya, 1996, p. 33). This religious framework not only shaped spiritual practices but also had significant implications for governance, societal norms, and rituals, promoting inclusivity and mutual welfare. However, the later rise of Vaishnavism and Buddhism gradually shifted the societal structure towards a more rigid hierarchy and class stratification.

The Gopals or Abhiras, as chronicled in the *Gopalaraj Vamsavali* and *Kirata Mundhum*, were early rulers of Nepal, with a notable figure, Nepa, a cowherd, credited with discovering the Shiva linga of Sri Pasupati Bhattacharya. This discovery, marked by his cow's milk flowing into a hole, highlights the deep Shaivist roots in Nepali history (Vajracharya and Malla, 1985, p. 121). According to the *Kirata Mundhum*, the Gopals ruled Nepal for eight generations, with their last king, Bhuvana Singh, being defeated by Yalamba, a Kirata king from Yalung in eastern Nepal. The Gopals' capital was located in Tistung, and their territory spanned from the Trisuli River in the west to the Tama Koshi River in the east, and from Chitlang in the south to the Himalayan snowline in the north (Chemjong, 2003, pp. 5-6). After their defeat, Yalamba shifted the capital to Thankot, expanding Nepal's territory eastward to the Teesta River (Chemjong, 2003, p. 6).

The *Kirata Mundhum* narrates that the goddess Yumasamang incarnated as the queen Suyenosuno Hangma, who united the Shinyuk (hills) and Mudan (Tarai) into a single kingdom, extending it to Kedarkhanda (Garhwal) and the Ganga River in the south (Chemjong 2003, pp. 7, 16, 17, 111-112). The Kiratas ruled Nepal for 1,963 years, from around 1700 BC, before being replaced by the Licchavis in the second century AD (Vajracharya and Malla 1985, pp. 121-122).

According to the *Mundhum*, every male aged eighteen was required to render military service to the state. The military structure was hierarchical, with an officer overseeing three hundred soldiers. Five such officers were grouped under a noble or commander, who was a member of the king's council. This noble was responsible for administering the land where these officers and their families resided. The land itself was collectively used by the people, who paid a tax amounting to one-tenth of their agricultural produce to the state (Chemjong, 2003, p. 56).

This system illustrates the intertwining of military service, land use, and taxation in the political organization of the time. The *Mundhum* reveals that the governance was organized with a clear division of responsibilities, where the king's council, consisting of ministers, military commanders, and two elderly representatives of the people, played a key role in decision-making (Chemjong 2003, p. 56). According to *Mundhum*, while the monarchy held authority at the center, local governance exhibited democratic principles. At the grassroots level, councils of elders known as *chumlung* were responsible for resolving disputes, including sensitive cases like incest. The *chumlung* embodied participatory governance, where community members gathered to deliberate and make collective decisions. This system functioned beyond the realm of beliefs and superstitions, suggesting a pragmatic approach to governance (Chemjong, 2003, pp. 36, 41-42).

The *Mundhum* also outlines certain laws related to agricultural life, reflecting the importance of agricultural practices and their relationship to the socio-political system. For instance, peasants were granted specific holidays during critical periods in the agricultural calendar. At the start of the rainy season, from the day of the first thunder, there were four days off for peasants. Similarly, the first four days of rainfall were observed as holidays. In the months of Chaitra (March) and Baisakh (April-May), peasants were given four days off due to storms. Furthermore, when cattle gave birth, the day was also observed as a holiday for the family that owned the cattle (Chemjong 2003, pp. 68-69). These agricultural laws suggest a society that recognized the importance of farming and sought to support the well-being of its peasants by allowing them rest during crucial farming seasons.

During the Licchavi period, the rulers implemented a structured taxation system comprising *bhaga* (agricultural tax), *kar* (trade tax), and *bhog* (cattle tax), which became the economic backbone of the kingdom. The *varta* system, which encompassed agriculture, cattle rearing, trade, and commerce, ensured economic sustainability (Vajracharya, 1996, pp. 97–98).

The rulers, traders, and artisans primarily resided in urban centers, while peasants lived in villages known as *gramas*. These *gramas* were organized into administrative units called *talas*, which were further grouped into *drangas*. The *drangas* were subsequently categorized into *visayas*, each governed by an officer known as the *visayapati*. This hierarchical administrative framework extended from Dolakha in the east to Gorkha in the west, covering a significant portion of the region (Shrestha, 1989, p. 64). Outside this administrative system, certain regions were under the authority of local chiefs, known as *samantas* and *mahasamantas*. While these chiefs maintained autonomy, they demonstrated allegiance to the central government by paying tribute, and presenting themselves annually to the King in Kathmandu (Shrestha, 1989, pp. 65–66).

In the Kathmandu Valley, prominent local chiefs such as the Varmanas of the Kiratas and the Guptas of the Abhiras or Gopals were integrated into the royal court as nobles, reflecting a strategy to consolidate power and ensure loyalty within the central governance structure. At the local level, the earlier Kirata system of *chumlung*—a council of elders—was adapted and renamed *panchali*. The *panchali* system was vital for local governance, facilitating community participation and resolving disputes. For example, *panchalis* were documented in areas such as Yupagrama and Dakshina Koligrama in Kathmandu, demonstrating their widespread application in managing local affairs (Vajracharya, 1996, p. 103). All this underscores the political pragmatism and inclusivity of the predominance of Shaiva philosophy during this period.

According to the *Gopala Raj Vamshavali*, the Licchavi king Supushpa Deva introduced the system of private landholding and the caste system (Vajracharya and Malla, 1985, pp. 122-123). The Anantalingeswor inscription of Narendradeva (656–665 AD) mentions castes like Brahmana and Chandala, marking early caste divisions (Vajracharya, 1996, p. 487). However, Licchavi inscriptions do not strictly enforce dharmasastra regulations, as most Kathmandu Valley inhabitants were primarily following Shaivism. Amsuvarma's 605 AD Bungmati inscription highlights his role in resolving religious conflicts,

while his 606 AD Hadigaon inscription records donations to Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Buddhist communities, promoting religious harmony (Vajracarya, 1996, pp. 290-308).

After the downfall of the Licchavi dynasty, around the latter half of eighth century AD, Chinese records from the Tang dynasty describe a society with stark economic divisions. The wealthy wore gold ornaments, while the poor used those made from bamboo and bones. The poor dressed in simple garments, and their homes were typically made of mud and stones. These people were peasants and artisans who worshipped goddesses and engaged in animal sacrifices as part of their religious practices (Nepal, 1984, pp. 161–164). This snapshot of social conditions points to significant disparities between the wealthy and the common folk, which were likely exacerbated by the Licchavi tradition of granting tax-free land to members of the royal family, and nobility. Such actions elevated the social and economic status of the ruling class and contributed to the deepening of economic inequality. For instance, an inscription from 506 AD at Thankot reveals that King Vasanta Deva's sister, Jaya Sundari, was granted a village called Jayapalika grama, which was exempt from taxation. The inscription explicitly states that tax collectors and law enforcers (Chat-bhat) were forbidden from entering this village (Vajracarya, 1996, pp. 91-93).

This practice further entrenched the privileges of the ruling elite, while peasants and artisans in these areas were directly controlled by the landlords. Land was also granted for the maintenance of religious shrines, rest houses, and the upkeep of priests. A notable inscription from 540 AD, found near the Pasupatinath Temple, reveals an example of land grants made for religious purposes. The inscription records how the Shaiva mother of Minister Bhaumagupta granted two plots of land in Vemagrama for a Sambhu shrine, where she established a Shiva linga in honor of her deceased husband (D. R. Regmi, 1983, p. 22). The woman's name, Gomini Abhiri, indicates that she was of Abhira origin, further highlighting the diverse ethnic composition of the Licchavi ruling class.

The *Mundhum* provides additional insight into the socio-political landscape of the Licchavi period. In the seventh century, during the reign of King Amsuvarma (also known as Hangsu Deva), the Tibetan ruler Srong Tsan Gampo married Bhrikuti, the daughter of the Nepali ruler. To protect the Kathmandu Valley, Srong Tsan Gampo sent twelve divisions of his cavalry, who settled in the hills surrounding the valley, each under an officer (Chemjong, 2003, p. 91). These twelve officers were granted Kipat lands in regions like Chautara (Sindhupalchowk) and Dhading, and they became responsible for the administration of these areas (Chemjong, 2003, p. 85). Their names are mentioned in the *Mundhum* as—Bal, Bomzan, Ghising, Pakhrin, Yonzon, Syangdan, Thing, Goley, Giaba, Moktan, Mikchan, and Bozu (Chemjong, 2003, p. 101). These soldiers, referred to as *Murmi* (border people) by the Tibetans, identified themselves as *Tamang*, meaning "cavalryman." The fact that these soldiers were granted land by the state shows that military service played a central role in land allocation during the Licchavi period.

At the end of eighth century AD, the struggle for wealth and power led to the rise of powerful nobles, known as *Thakaju* or *Thakuri*, who eventually seized control and governed Nepal until the 12th century AD. The increasing fragmentation of power, coupled with internal conflict, weakened central

authority. This decline in the Licchavi state facilitated the emergence of other regional powers, such as the Khas Kingdom in the west and the Simraungarh Kingdom in the south, in the 11th century (Vaidya, 2001, p. 2).

In the ancient times, the Khasas had their state in Humla where they had migrated from Khasgarh in the Tarim Basin of western China owing to Yuehchi-Kushan invasions from eastern China as narrated in Mundhum (Chemjong, 2003, pp. 240-241). Identified as Sai or Sakas in the Chinese Book of Han of 111 AD (Taishan, 2010, p. 13), they practiced matrilineal succession, as recorded in the Mahabharata's Karna Parva (Ganguli, 2002, p. 84) and Chinese chronicle of eastern Nu belonging to 586 AD of the Sui period (Atkinson, 1974, pp. 458-459). Yuan Chwang also described Karnali as a region ruled by queens (Watters, 2004, p. 330).

By the eleventh century, the Khasas had consolidated their rule in Karnali region with twin capitals at Dullu and Sinja, establishing a powerful state. In the first half of the fourteenth century, Raja Ripu Malla aggressively expanded their domain from Kaski in the east to the Sutlej River in the west and from southwestern Tibet in the north to the Tarai plains in the south, as evidenced by inscriptions in Lumbini and Kapilvastu (Adhikary, 1997, pp. 44-45). The ruling elites strategically aligned with Buddhism and Vaishnavism, while the general populace adhered to the tantric version of Shaivism with Shiva as Kailasha Masto. Under Raja Krachalla in the thirteenth century, dharmasastras were introduced in western Nepal. His 1223 AD copper plate inscription from the Balesvara temple in Sui (Kumaon) documents the invitation of a Brahmana, Bhatta Narayana Bangaja from Bengal to instruct nobles and local Brahmans in Dharmashastras and Jyotishsastra (Adhikary, 1997, pp. 159-163). This maneuver entrenched hierarchical control, reinforcing land grants and tax exemptions that disproportionately benefited the ruling class, exacerbating economic disparities.

The fragmentation of Khasa Rajya in the late fourteenth century, fueled by caste and property divisions, resulted in the formation of the Baise and Chaubaise states, which were eventually annexed by the Gorkhalis in the eighteenth century. The once-fluid Khasa identity solidified into rigid caste hierarchies, subordinating artisans like Kamis and Sarkis, as well as tailors, musicians (Damais, Hudkes), and even influencing ascetic orders such as Dashnami and Kanphata yogis (Adhikary, 1997, pp. 44-45).

In the Kathmandu Valley, the Mallas, who ruled Nepal from 1201 AD, were descendants of Ari Deva, a powerful noble, with partial Rajput lineage from Simraungarh. Among them, Jayastithi Malla (1370-1395 AD) was a key figure who ascended the throne of Lalitpur in 1370 AD. By 1382 AD, he consolidated power over Kantipur and Bhaktapur. To reinforce his rule, he invoked divine legitimacy, proclaiming himself as an incarnation of Rama and Buddha (Vajracarya and Malla, 1985, pp. 131, 133). Jayastithi Malla invited five Brahmana priests—Kirtinath Upadhyaya, Raghunath Jha, Srinath Bhatta, Mahinath Bhatta, and Ramnath Jha—from the southern plains to codify laws based on Manusmriti and Narada Smriti. This legal framework institutionalized private property and rigid caste divisions. His first legal code permitted the buying, selling, and mortgaging of land, including houses, irrigated fields (khet),

and priestly land grants (*birta*) (Acharya and Narharinath, 2004, pp. 90). This shift undermined the traditional Shaiva communal landholding system, which led to social unrest. To counter potential resistance, a second legal code enforced a strict caste hierarchy, dividing society into four varnas and thirty-six castes, each bound to specific religious rites and occupations. The fifth code criminalized caste mobility, punishing those who deviated from their prescribed profession (Acharya and Narharinath, 2004, pp. 90).

The transformation of professional guilds (*gaustikas*) into hereditary castes further entrenched social stratification. These included Brahmins (priests and scholars), wrestlers, tax collectors, and artisans such as incense and lamp makers. The largest agrarian caste, the *Jyapu*, comprised peasants and cattle herders (Pradhan, 1991, p. 30). Similarly, *Jaisi* Brahmins were reclassified as *Shresthas*, placing them below Brahmins and *Kshatriyas* (Wright, 2004, p. 126). Over time, these divisions expanded, creating sixty-four castes within the Newar community (Acharya and Narharinath, 2004, pp. 91-92).

The commoditization of land and rigid caste hierarchy weakened the Malla state. Economic power became concentrated in the hands of private landowners, traders, and merchants, while peasants and artisans bore heavy tax burdens. The land tax remained at an oppressive fifty percent of agricultural produce. Local landlords (*pradhans*), under the supervision of tax collectors (*dware*), extracted revenue, while officials known as *mohinaikes* demarcated land, assigned cultivators, and evicted defaulters (Regmi, 1999, pp. 34).

The Gorkhali rulers politically unified Nepal in the latter half of eighteenth century under a Shaiva framework but failed to alter entrenched socio-economic structures in the west, Kathmandu Valley, and the southern Tarai, where private property had already deepened social inequalities. To expand state control over land, they introduced the *jagir* system, granting soldiers and officials transferable state-owned land, encouraging agricultural expansion (Regmi, 1999, pp. 38-43). Unlike previous rulers who relied on *Dharmashastras*, the Gorkhalis initially rejected these scriptures as the basis for law. The 1793 legal code required laws to be formulated through consultations with Brahmins, merchants, nobles, and community leaders, ensuring decisions were based on local traditions and customs (Regmi, 1999, pp. 209). However, by the nineteenth century, Vaishnavism gradually influenced the Gorkhali ruling elite in Kathmandu.

The Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816) led to a tax increase to fifty percent under the *Adhiya* system, which remained even after the war. The *Kut* system (1812 AD) further burdened peasants, requiring them to pay taxes in kind or cash at high rates (Regmi, 1999, pp. 87-88; Pradhan, 1991, pp. 176). The resulting rural indebtedness was exacerbated by illegal taxation imposed by local authorities (Regmi, 1999, pp. 72). The commoditization of land consolidated landlord power, allowing them to control taxation and judicial functions.

During this period, caste-based legal codes resurfaced. A law in 1837 barred Magars from consuming food prepared by artisans, reinforcing caste hierarchy (Nepali, 2003, p. 136). The *Muluki Ain* of 1854 was introduced by Jang Bahadur Rana. He invited two Brahmins, Lekhpati Jha and Lokpati Jha from Rautahat to codify caste system into state law (Hofer, 2004, pp. 1-2). Based on *Manusmriti* and

Narada Smriti, the *Muluki Ain* stratified the society into *Tagadhari* (sacred-thread wearers), *Namasinya Matwali* (non-enslavable alcohol drinkers), *Masinya Matwali* (enslavable alcohol drinkers), and “impure” castes (Hofer, 2004, pp. 10). Artisans were classified as untouchables, while Sino-Tibetan groups were placed in *Matwali* categories.

Although the *Muluki Ain* persisted for over a century, its legal framework was finally dismantled in 1963 when King Mahendra introduced a new *Muluki Ain*, ostensibly granting legal equality. However, the deeply entrenched caste-based power structures ensured that social disparities persisted well beyond this legal reform.

Conclusion

This study highlights the material and ideological forces that shaped Nepali society, emphasizing class struggle and the role of religion in reinforcing exploitation. It critiques how ruling elites use ideological frameworks to maintain dominance, and in Nepal, Vaishnavism and its caste-based stratification served the interests of the elite—priests, landowners, and state functionaries—while marginalizing peasants and lower castes.

In contrast, Shaivism, particularly through its Vaisesika philosophy, presents a materialist challenge to these hierarchical structures. By focusing on the interplay between matter, consciousness, and human action, Shaivism promotes egalitarianism, collective welfare, and social cooperation, offering a counterpoint to the exploitative ideologies that sustain elite power. This tradition aligns more closely with the interests of marginalized groups, advocating for justice, meritocracy, and social harmony.

However, Nepal's history, particularly during the Licchavi, Malla, and later periods, shows how Vaishnava Dharmasastras and caste-based systems perpetuated class divisions. Legal reforms like the *Muluki Ain* institutionalized caste hierarchies, benefiting the elite and entrenching economic inequalities. Shaivism offers a radical critique of these exploitative systems. Its focus on the material world—shaped by the transactional relationship between *dravya* (matter), *guna* (knowledge), and *karma* (action)—challenges the inequality perpetuated by the state and religious orthodoxy. Revisiting Shaivism from a critical, materialist perspective offers a framework to challenge entrenched social hierarchies. Its advocacy for collective well-being and social equality offers a potential pathway for addressing the persistent inequalities in contemporary Nepalese society.

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