

Life of the Chepang now and then: A Study of Chitwan District

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Abstract

The Chepang is one of the indigenous nationalities of Nepal have changed their life style in short span of time. The study analyzes changing aspects of the Chepang in term of socio cultural, religious and economic pattern. Main objective of this study is to examine why and how the life pattern of the Chepang has been changed in Chitwan in short span of time. Qualitative research design has been followed to analyze the changing socio –economic, cultural religious status of the Cheapng. Both primary and secondary source of data were used for this study and conclusion of the study is based on the collected information. It is found that life of the Chepang have been changed due to modernization, Christianization, invasion of neighboring culture and political system of the nation.

Keywords: Chepang, Culture, Social, Economic, Religion, Chitwan

Introduction

Chepang is one of the indigenous nationalities of Nepal. Their traditional homeland is scatted in centre hilly region mainly in Chitwan, Dhading, Makawanpur districts of Bagmati province and Gorkha district of Gandaki province. According to the CBS report 2011 total population of the Chepang is 68399, however, now the number is near to the 90,000. The following table shows the district wise population of the Chepang.

Table: 1 Total Population of the Chepang since Past to Now

S.N.	Source	Year	Population
1	National census, 2008	2008	14264
2	National census, 2018	2018	9274
3	Cornel Jest	2018	16000
4	Walter Frank	2030	24947

5	CEDA	2032/33	25000
6	Praja development program	2034/35	31890
7	CBS Report ,2048	2048	25098
8	CBS Report ,2058	2058	52252
9	CBS Report ,2068	2068	68399

Source: National Population Report (2008 to 2068)

Above table shows the population of the Chepang since 2008 to 2011. Before 2008 B.S., there did not mention the caste/ ethnicity in population census. According to the data in 2008 total population of the Chepang was 14264 and national census report 2018 noted 9274 that was the lowest record of the number of Chepang pupation. Increasing trend of Chepang is not population increasing rate is fluctuating.

Table 2: District wise Population percentage of the Chepang

S.N.	Districts	Percentage
1.	Makawanpur	37
2.	Chitwan	38
3.	Dhading	18.5
4.	Gorkha	6
5.	Other district	0.5

Source: Adhikari, 2070

Now Chepang settlement is scattered half of the nation, however, 99% Chepang population scatted in four districts of Nepal such as 37% are lived in Makawanpur, 38% are lived in Chitwan, 18.5% are settled in Dhading and 6% are lived Gorkha district. Only 0.5% is scattered other neighboring districts like Tanahun, Lamjung, Parsha, and Kathmandu.

In the past, they were known as Praja but now they love to ' the word 'Chepang' because the 'word' 'praja' does not reflects the traditional identities of them. Till the time of Rana regime they were addressed as 'Mijhar' the main person of the area but the situation is not go ahead because Hindu people invaded them. After invasion of Hindu they started to live in forest side and became unknown. During the time of Panchayat regime king Birendra had met the leaders of the Cheapng and lunched 'Praja development program". After running Praja development program, the word 'Chepang 'replaced by the word' Praja' in legal document government agencies changed the word Chepang into 'praja'. The glorious history of the Chepang converts into the 'poor marginalized backward community". Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities embellished in 2001 and again the word 'Chepang is used to address ' Praja' and NEFIN categorized 'Chepang 'as marginalized community of Nepal. The Chepang has no fixed belief practice, however, they claimed themselves as animist and respect shaman as Guru (Path Founder) of the society. Now they also follow religion like other community. Some of them

are followed Christian and other claim themselves as Hindu or Buddhist religion. This is the landmark socio economic and cultural changes of the Chepang.

Reviews

Many scholars, writers and anthropologists have carried out researches on Chepangs and identified them on the basis of their observation in different periods of time. B.H. Hodgson wrote descriptions on Chepang in *Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1847). He is the first known scholar who wrote about Chepangs and their language for the first time. According to him, "Interesting tongues of a genuinely aboriginal characters, which are spoken in the East of the Kali by the certain forest tribes existing in scanty numbers nearly in a state of nature such as the *Chepang* and *Kusanda*" (1236). He further describes Chepang ethnologically in the following way:

Amid the dense forest of the center region of Nepal, to the westward of the great valley, dwell in scanty number and nearly in state of nature, two broken tribes having no apparent affinity with the civilized race of the country, and seeing like the fragments of an earlier population. (36)

Hodgson's description mainly focuses on the language as it was based on the mission of collecting language spoken in different parts of Mahabharat range. It makes clear that Chepangs are one of the oldest communities having separate ethnic identities. Similarly Pandey, Madhusudan, highlighting about nature and behaviors of Chepangs, states, "Apparent affinity with the civilized races of the country, and seem like fragments of an earlier population. They pay no taxes, acknowledge no allegiance, and live entirely on wild fruits and the produce of the chase" (73). These descriptions show that Chepang is one of the ethnic groups of Nepal which succeeded to attract enough attention of foreign scholars and researchers. However, no native scholars and government documents have mentioned anywhere about Chepangs in detail. Documented history of Nepal hardly mentioned about Chepangs although there are some references about their historical situation. As Rai has mentioned:

The region seems to have been controlled by pretty kings of small area, offended mentioned in local legend. The southern part of Dhading was taken over by Ram Shaha (1605-33) of Gorkha, while the neighboring the domain of the *Sen* Kings of Makawanpur until unification of Nepal. (3)

There is no particular description or a documented history of Chepangs, so it is not clear about their original place, however, it is accepted that they are one of the oldest communities of Nepal living in central southern part of Nepal. In 1967, Dor Bahadur Bista mentioned about Chepang in his book *People of Nepal*. His descriptions fulfilled the long gap of study although his interpretation about Chepangs is similar to that of the western researchers. He identified Chepang in this way, "Chepang are one of the least known minority groups of Nepal and little

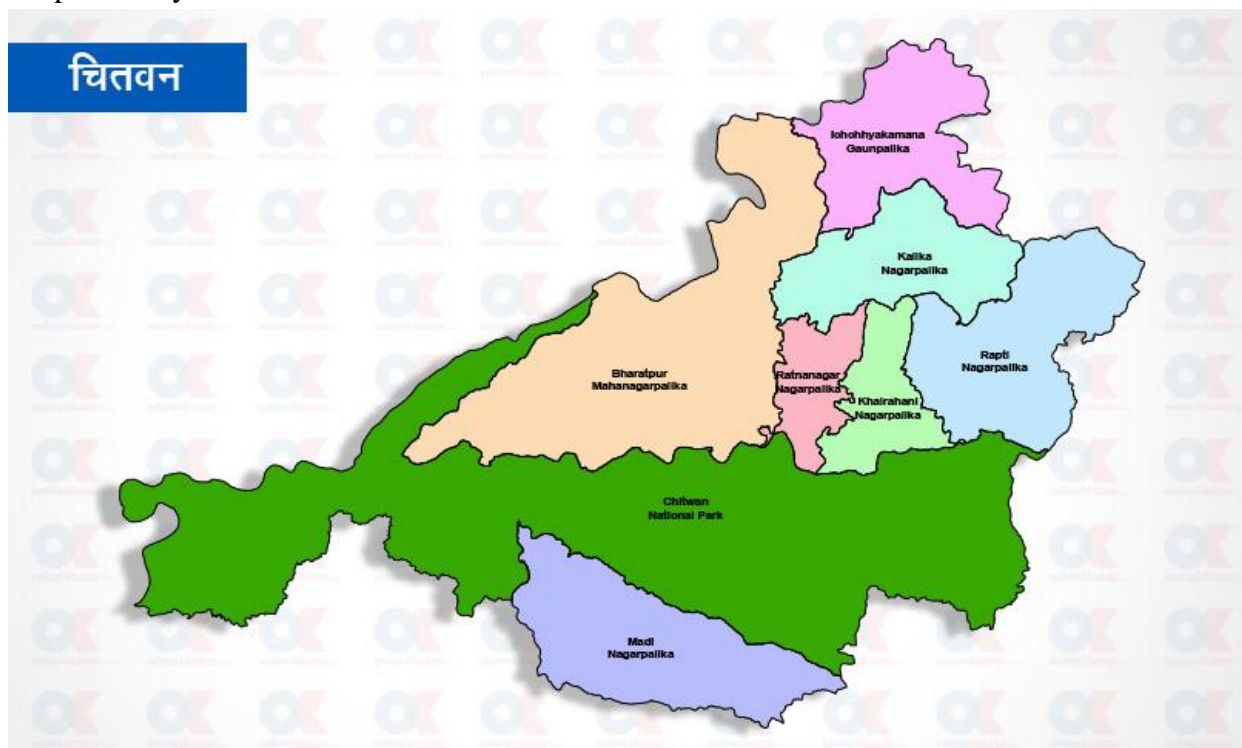
former study has been made them” (91). Bista wrote few sentences about Chepangs and their identities and established new landmark for further study. In the periphery of the time, many western researchers studied about Chepang for various purposes. Caughley is one of them who studied on Chepang language and their overall perspective of life, writes thus, "At times, the Chepang must have come into contact with the totally nomadic Kusunda, a hunting people whose language affiliation is unknown. Chepang were traditionally regarded them as hostile, saying that the Kusundas would shoot them on sight" (10). Caughley's idea is more relevant on Chepangs and this replaces the nineteenth century sketchy descriptions and brings significant turning point of the study on Chepangs. In same way Dhungel writes, "That the word 'Chepang' has originated from the original word '*Che-Wang*' the word "*Che*" means dog and 'Bang' means stone in another set of meaning '*Che*' means bow and ban means 'arrow' collectively that produces a combined meaning of an ethnic community living in the top of mountains and hunting with dog, bow and arrow. So that those who live in the cave or stone with dog or arrow are known as the 'Chewang' ultimately that appears as word 'Chepang'" (67). Many scholars from home and abroad identified Chepang from its etymological meanings. These sets of meanings reflect Chepangs identities as form of conjectures. Similarly, Thapaliya (1987) and Dhungel (1995) identified them as people living in stony land.

Above mentioned reviews and comment it is cleared that Chepangs have their own culture and religion, however, it is going to change due to modernization, urbanization, influenced of Christian religion and other religions like Hindu and Buddhist religion.

Research methodology and Study Area

The study is based on qualitative research design and followed the interpretive paradigm. Both primary and secondary source of data were used in this study. Primary data were collected through in-depth interview. Six individuals were selected for in depth interview. Participants were selected from six local bodies (Bharatpur metropolitan, Kalika Ichhakamana, Ratnanagar, Rapti and Madi where Chepang settlement is scattered. Purposive random sampling method was used to select the participants. Activists and traditional leaders who have knowledge about changes of life style of the Chepang were the participants of this study. Secondary data were collected through library research. Books, articles, reports and other previously published materials were used as secondary sources of the data. Collected data were analyzed and presented the findings into the paragraph description.

Map of Study Area



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maula_Kalika < Adopted, 2023

About Participants

P1: 60-year-old women lived in Ichhakamana rural municipality who adopted Christian religion.

P2: 76-year-old person lived in Kalika municipality ward no 10 worked as Pande

P3: 80-year-old lived in Rapti municipality has been working in community level for the development of the Chepang

P4: 40 years old women lived in Ratnagar municipality. She has been working in the Nepal Chepang organization

P5: 55 years old person has been living in Madi municipality. He has struggling for the Chepang identities

P6: 71 years old lived in Bharatpur metropolitan city ward no 29. He is former representative of the Chepang

Life of the Chepang Now and Then

Traditional life style of the Chepang was based on the demand of ecology and environment. They followed animism as belief practice and they worshipped land, sky, water and tree as symbol of god. Their shamans named ' Pande' support them to perform the worship ceremony. Ritual ceremonies and cultural festivities were based on traditional belief pattern. Now, they follow new way of life which is different from traditional one.

Changes in cultural Festivities and Ritual Ceremonies

They followed primitive life style in the past and cultural festivities were based on the guidelines of shamanic performance. *Chonam*, *namrung*, *bhayar* or Bhume (god of land), *sime* (God of water), *tonkolog* are the traditional festivities of the Chepang. In this regards, P1 notes "In the past we followed traditional festivals only we have no idea about Dashin. Tihar and other Hindu festivals but now we are limited in Hindu; we also adopted Christian festivals like birthday party, Christmas etc." (Personal Interview, 20079). In the same way p2 notes " we Chepangs are highly suppressed by Chhetri, Bramin Tamang and They compelled to follow their festivals like *dashain*, *tihar* and *maghe sangranti* now we celebrate these festival like our own festival . People hates our respected shaman as form of evil spirit. Without existence of shaman it is impossible to continue our festivals and ritual ceremonies." (personal Interview). In the same lines p3 highlights " in our traditional ritual ceremonies there needed various plant and animals that only possible to collect from the jungle . Now we can't enter the jungle to collect forest product , community forest and national park restricts to collect forest product like animal skills and the plant root so that we can't celebrates our festivals and ritual ceremonies without the plants' root and animal's skin. In *tonkolog* (special worship of the ancestor and family gods) there need *pura's* (a birds found in the forest of the Chepang settlement) feature and skin of deer now it is impossible to kill bird and deer so that ancestor and the gods cannot satisfied from the worship. Various huddles we face I our life so that we change our ceremonies and adopted new one based on Christian religion "(Personal Interview). Since few decades most of the Chepangs have adopted Christian religion as main religion. Now they gather into the church and pray Christ for well being and prosperity. They forget their traditional rituals and festivals. In this regards p4 notes, "In my village more than half of the Chepangs have already adopted Christian religion. Churches can be seen near the house. They left the traditional belief practice festivals and ritual ceremonies. I am confused on that; we Chepang lost our traditional identities" (Personal interview). P4 is worried on the shifting process because the traditional identities of the Chepang are being converted into new one which is either Christian or Hindu. During the period of Panchayat regime government adopted monolingual and monoculture (*Ek Bhasa and Ek vesh*). Such political system forced them to follow Hindu religion, however, they maintained their belief practice through separation from mainstream culture but now development programs and mass media joined them into the wave of changed.

After lined with the other community, specially into the connection with Christian they covert their believe pattern and adopted new religion. Economic forces and other livelihood pattern encourage them to adopted Christianity. After adopting Christian belief practice they total forget the traditional pattern of celebrating rituals and cultural festivities. P5 share is experiences on the issue, "Last five year ago, a child became sick in my village, and parents had no money to treat him. Local people did not support the family. He reached into the contact of neighboring church. At that time pastor consoled the family and managed to treat the boy in Katmandu at missionary hospital . After few days the family had visited the

missionary hospital. After some month whole family adopted Christian religion. Near his house the family built new church. Whole village believed on the power of Christ and the church rather than the traditional pattern of life style. " (Personal Interview) . It is showed that day to day demand and their fulfillment is one of the main cases of shifting life style from traditional to new on. Investment of church and Christian society is increasing in Chitwan that create problems on the existence of traditional belief practice of the Chepang. Day by day the number of church is increasing in the Chepang village, however, Nepal Chepang Association a leading organization of the Chepang campaigning against Christianity and demanded to maintain traditional cultural heritage of the Chepang but the effort is not effective. With the hope of the fulfillment of daily need people's attraction seems toward the Christianity. In this context p6 notes, " We Chepang are poor and marginalized due to lack of proper mobilization of resources so that we cannot sustain with the support of other.

Now government announced the hill area of the three district Chitwan , Makawanpur and Dhading as core area of the Chepang but none of the programs have been lunched to uplift the Chepang . Now Christian society runs various schools in Chitwan to enhance the education status of the Chepang. Literacy rate and access of the Chepang on higher education is increasing due to the support of church " (Personal Interview). It is showed that none of the participants neglect the role of the church and Christian society on developing the livelihood strategy and education status of the Chepang so that now church play higher role to convince the Chepang to shift from traditional pattern to new one. Except that influences of other cultures, mass media, modernization and contemporary education and political system also play role to shift life style from traditional one to new one.

In study area, the Chepang culture is being using as matter of tourism rather than the subject of faith. It projects as distorted from as culture of undeveloped community and entertain to other. The practice creates a kind of humiliation on the Chepang because the culture and ritual practices of the Chepang is not the matter of entertainment. It carries the glorious history and faith of people.

Changes in Economic Activities and livelihood Assets

During the course of the last fifty year, livelihood assets and economic status of the Chepang has been changed due to various forces. Political system and policies of the government plays higher role on the transformation. Before last fifty year, the economic status the Chepang had depended on agriculture, animal husbandry and hunting gathering. At that time Chitwan valley had just opened for other people. After established national park in Chitwan hunting gathering was almost ended and they compelled to join in agriculture and animal husbandry. In this regards P3 notes, "Before announced national park at least two months we had involved in hunting gathering. Hunting is one of the livelihood assets of that time; we killed animals and bird for meat. We fulfilled demand of meat from hunting gathering. After established the national park many Chepangs were captured and imprisoned in the changed of Rhino hunting

or hunting. We have no expertise on agriculture so that we could not uplift our livelihood at that time while government banded the hunting is illegal act " (Personal Interview).

Similarly p2 notes about the changing livelihood asset of the Chepang in the course of time , " Our traditional livelihood was based on wood collection and selling , animals and birds hunting but now community forest and national park restricted on that activities. We are compelled to shift new one due to policy of the government but we have no alternatives. Till the time government does not share the benefit of national park and community forest with us. We are victimized from state and now we became as refugee of the land " (Personal Interview). The expression is very pitiful because they have no plain land for cultivation and the original owners of the land reached into the stage of refugee to use natural resources. P6 adds, "We demand to share income of National park but the government does not take care about the demand. Government only lunched programs related to providing few food which is insufficient our livelihood neither based on traditional pattern nor entered into modern form" (Personal Interview). Same issue has been raised in Ratnanagar municipality because livelihood of the Chepang is difficult in city area that mentioned by P4 as , " In my village there is restriction to entre forest, however, we live near the forest . Buffer zone area and administration of community forest creates huddles to collect grass from the forest so it is difficult to continue animal husbandry. Some of the Chepangs had already left the area. Chepang are not habituated in modern source of livelihood like job, business, however, some of them involved in manual work as labor inside and out the nation " (Personal Interview).

P5 also projects the same types of problems faced by the Chepang in livelihood management and he notes, "Chitwan national park creates problem in collecting grass and grazing the cattle. We have no other option to live in our settlement. We are compelled to leave the homeland because national park administration. We have no alternatives of livelihood except animal husbandry. Now we are being poorer than the past. In some cases Chepang involved in hunting animals to fulfill the livelihood. Involving labor work is the new source of livelihood of the Chepang "(Personal Interview). Government and national park or community forest creates problems in the life of the Chepang to sustain livelihood. P6 has different experiences on the changing livelihood pattern and notes " Now we are going to change our livelihood because non government and government organizations provide various support to us for the improvement of livelihood. I have thirty goats and around hundred chicken and other cattle. I pant grass in my land. I have also leasehold forest for grass cultivation. In my village most of the Chepang have change their livelihood through utilizing he support of the government and non government organization" (Personal Interview). She is satisfied and happy with the changing source of livelihood.

All the participants of this study have their perspective about the life of the Chepang now and then. Most of the participants are agreed that socio, economic and religious status of the

Chepang has been changed due to various reasons like changing political system, polices and modernization, mass media and influences of other culture.

Conclusion

The Chepang is one of the fasting changing indigenous nationalities of Nepal. The life style and livelihood strategies of the Chepang are changing day by day. They could not maintain their traditional life style because government policies, modern education system, Christianization , influences of other culture and modernization play role to convert from traditional to new one. Livelihood strategies, occupation and economic source also changes because their traditional pattern of livelihood based on hunting and gathering now the activities is legally banded. Now their livelihood is based on wage labor because they have no proper land for cultivation. Community forest and national park create problems to continue animal husbandry. Traditional pattern of celebrating rituals and cultural festivities also convert into new form which is different from traditional life pattern.

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