

# Baikunthapur - A Village in Western Tarai

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Infact, no serious research in totality has been done by any institutions as to how many thousand villages are there in Nepal.

After the introduction of Panchayat system, Nepal has been divided into 75 districts for development purposes. The village which has the population of 2000 or more was termed as a village panchayat in Nepal. At present there are about 4000 such village Panchayats in Nepal. The bulk of the population of about 15 millions live in these villages. Traditional style of life still persists in these villages. But the villages have begun to change rapidly and the pace of socio-economic and political changes is likely to increase rather than decrease. It is very urgent to study such typical various linguistic areas of our country. Either we can collect the facts now or they are lost forever.

The Nepalese village community has not well figured rather prominently in early and current sociological and anthropological literature. As such, the present writer attempts to study Baikunthapur, a village of Nawalparasi district in tarai of western Nepal, just

to give few insights regarding their mode of socio-cultural life and development. The social structure of many villages in Nepal raises problems for concerted action which must be squarely faced by all who would speculate upon or plan for the real future of rural Nepal. Baikunthapur, a small village of 228 persons in the Nawalparasi district of Lumbini Anchal (Zone) is a fair specimen of the complex village settlements which needs the prompt attention for its rural development.

It is about two kilometre east-south to Parasi which is a district headquarter. My study includes 31 mudhouses, with many thatched roof & a few tiled roofs. Eight different caste groups live over there and are mainly agriculturists. Most of these household members are peasants having very marginal plots of land. A few of them rent in land form other villages for their livelihood, a few offer labour for their secondary occupation.

## History of the area

The plains have been occupied since time-unknown, by many settlers like Var, Tharu,

Kurmi etc. Though history of this Nawalparasi district goes back to pre-historic period, it is not possible to trace geneologically the first commers of the village. The stone tools found in the area has proved the presence of human habitation in ancient period. Other cultural remains seems to be lying burried in many archaeological sites. In the past, Palpali ruler Mukunda Sen had not only reigned over the hills but had also tried to consolidate his position in the tarai plains of southern flap of Palpa (1750-1782).<sup>1</sup> F. B. Hamilton has argued that Sen dynasty had to fight here with the Musleen Nawab with great courage and venture.<sup>2</sup>

The plains of Baikunthapur was quite malarious just before the advent of democratic life in Nepal. The area was covered intensively with many forests. There were hardly few hill people then except Tharus and few other Ploin's ethnic groups. It seems probable according to many informants that the first inhabitants of the area were Var, Teli and Kurmi, though no concrete evidence is yet available.

In Baikunthapur, settlements, according to many informants started only during the Prime-ministership of Chandra Shamsher Rana. It was only in B. C. 1978 that few houses were built around the Parasi market area and in this village.

### Settlement Pattern

The history is reflected in the sitting of the village houses. There are two mud roads after crossing the river Jharai from western boundary of Parasi Bazar. One road goes to Kashia village and it leads to Jamuwad

while second one leads eastward to Triveni. Triveni is the holy place where five tributaries and Tamsa rivulets meet with big Narayani river. Most of the pilgrimage go to this place in many religious festivals to have ritual baths over there. After walking about two Kilometre from the river Jharai also is located a cremation ground. We have to turn right southwards in order to reach Baikunthapur. At the north of the widened mud road there is a garden of mangoes & other trees. As soon as the garden is terminated one enters the village from northern side.

Settlement pattern of this village can be stated to be intermediate between the isolated homestead type and tightly nucleated type. This is the pattern usually found in numerous tarai villages in Nepal. The houses are built by the side of road and small lane. These houses are not however attached to each other.

### Housing

Within the village there are eight different castes groups. Members of the each of the caste group live together in the same vicinity. The village is stretched from north to southwards. The castes members have built their residence in groups. If we notice from northward to south, the first caste group is Teli, then Var, Kurmi, Kewat & lastly towards the southcorner of the village live the Teli & Dhobi, Chamars have their residence a little apart at the west-side. However there is no uniform rule about this, one may be found to be living a little further.

1. Mechi to Mahakali, Vol. 3, pp. 890.

2. Hamilton, F. B.- An account of Kingdom of Nepal.

The village has 31 houses mostly huts. Two houses at the two extreme ends are of bricks. Remainder are of clay structures thatched with straws and cut bamboo stripes.

### **Pattern of Cultivation**

All the villagers are engaged in the cultivation of land. Rice is the main crop grown here and is entirely utilized for village consumption. Cash crops are hardly grown for what of irrigation facilities and improved variety of seeds & fertilizers. In most cases vegetables are grown for local use. A few sell their vegetables in the Kasia weekly hat, which is held regularly. The needed cash enters every household by selling rice, brinjal, papaya, banana and few livestock in this market on every Wednesday & Saturday. Lentils are also grown. Tenant families belonging to the different lineage often used to cultivate jointly the lands that any individual among them held on lease from the land-lord. But at present after the introduction of land reform act in 1964, there are only four households which are tenants. All the households have their own land. A popular changes in the agrarian structure have been quite accomplishing with a progressive division in many family interests. Fruit trees of all types native to the areas, such as mango, bel, guava, jamuno, jackfruit, banana and papaya are found in the village. A few bamboo clustures are also found which is essential for the roofs of the clay structures and the walls. These bamboos are in great demand and gives them cash in times of requirements. Paddy cultivation starts, from June and harvest is done in November-December.

If villagers agree themselves cultivation can be done on share system. The owner of the land supplies half the seeds and manure or half their cost, while cultivator supplies the other half and the plough and the bullocks

besides his own labour and the crop is shared equally. If one wants the entire produce the cultivators are hired on a daily wages. Sometimes labour exchange is also the rule in the village. There is acute shortage of water supply and irrigation because of which the peasants have to rely completely on rain God. During my visit, the rain God was not pleased; so the peasants were nervous. But though late the rain fell and the fields were full of paddy cultivators. That was really a pleasant period for everybody. Government had sanctioned Rs. 75,000/- for the construction of canal from Ramnagar but villagers feel that the local Panchayat is not serious on it and the money is misutilized.

### **Land Tenure**

According to a old villager, the first landlord of this village was Shyam Sundar. It is said that during the time of Chandra Samsher, he could not pay the land revenue, so he left the land to Bhagoti. It is only after Sixties that land was gradually becoming costlier. It is because, the malaria was completely eradicated, deforestation started and the migration of the people from hill region for want of land began during 1970's.

None of the householder owns very large quantities of land. The total area of the land of 31 households in the village Baikunthapur in 1983 was only 81 bigha and 18 katha. From the point of view of the ownership of the land presently cultivated, it may be stated here that the caste Kurmi has more land, 31-10-0 beghas, than other castes in the village. As against this, other castes in the village owned land comparatively less. The next castes which have more land in this context are Var and the Teli. Chamar (Tanner's) has more land than other castes like Tharikar, Dhobi, Thakur and Kewat.

Land distribution among different castes in Baikunthapur in 1983 is shown in the table I below:-

Table I

## Distribution of Land among different castes\*

S.No.	Name of the caste	Land owned in bigha
1.	Kurmi	31-10-0
2.	Var	19-15-0
3.	Kewat	2-0-0
4.	Teli (Gupta)	17-0-0
5.	Thakur (Nau)	1-10-0
6.	Dhobi	3-5-0
7.	Tharikar	1-10-0
8.	Chaman	5-8-0
Total		80-8-0

\* Source: District land revenue office, Parasi 1983, September.

We see that agriculture is the main basis of the village economic system. The circulation of the money is limited to a minimum within the village, barter and exchange of services being common in the past. Thus status considerations determined

social relationships in the traditional way of life.

The influence of the town is felt and transmitted by the literate members of the neighbouring village members and the person who work at Parasi, which is the district headquarters. As the income from land is not good and the size of the land decreases through continuous division, it is necessary to bring in money from other sources. So a few youths are trying to secure a place in government offices, though even in a very lowest post.

### Population

According to my census in the field period, the village has a population of 228 persons with 116 males and 112 females. No such great movement of population as compare to other villages near east-west highway has taken place here. The population is divided into eight caste groups. There are mainly Kurmi, Teli and Var in great numbers. The Vars are supposed to be the oldest settlers here and they still claim it. The following table II gives the clear picture of the population and caste structure of the village.

Table II

## Castes/Households according to Population

S.No.	Caste	Household	Population		Total
			Male	Female	
1.	Kurmi	7	39	35	74
2.	Var	8	32	25	57
3.	Teli	5	17	18	35
4.	Dhobi	4	7	10	17
5.	Thakur	1	9	3	12
6.	Tharikar	1	2	4	6
7.	Kewat	1	1	2	3
8.	Chaman	4	11	13	24
Total		31	118	110	228

### **Caste Hierarchy and Social Position**

The peculiarity of this village is that none Brahmin caste live here. Castes in this village, as in other parts of the country, forms a hierarchy with the Brahmin at the top. Since there is no Brahmin caste residing, Kurmi caste comes at the top. Then simultaneously in order, come Var, Kewat, Teli, Thakur, Dhobi, Tharikar and Chamar. The lowest caste at the bottom is Chamar (Sarki). The castes at the bottom have food habits and customs which are ceremonically unclean according to Hindu ritualistic notions. It is said that Teli caste was recognized as lower in status but when they gradually raise their economic conditions they write themselves as Gupta. So wealth plays pivotal role in moving up of the status of the village community at large. Chamar is the lowest castes in the village which is also making conscious effort to move up and their desire for a change in social status is recognized by the rest of the community. The first step forwards this is the giving up of occupation thought to be unclean. Such case has been noticed among Chamars. Marriage within the village is rare. Intercastes marriage is severely dealt. Social interaction in the village is smooth.

The hierarchy formed by the castes in the village is given below though it is vague:-

1. Kurmi
2. Var
3. Kewat
4. Teli (Gupta)
5. Thakur (Nau)
6. Dhobi (Washerman)
7. Tharikar
8. Chamar (Tanners)

These positions are judged on the basis of the ceremonial and secular values of this

village only, and may vary from those in other villages. Moreover within this village there are disagreement over these positions. This feeling is found to be prevailing among the castes thought to be of equal status.

Though there are no Brahmins, the work of the Brahmin is done from the man from other village. He is a Brahmin migrated from Palpa long time ago. He is the priest of all the residents over this village too. It is said that he earns about Rs. 10,000/- annually from ritual works only from various castes groups.

The caste groups in Baikunthapur are at the same time status group. In some activities, e. g. political and economic, members of a caste do not always combine. The strength of the castes between the members always varies in status. But it differs aptly in the sphere of ritual. A superior caste would not eat from the cooking pots, nor drinks from the hands of a caste which it regards as inferior, nor would its members sit next to the inferior people in the unbroken line when eating. Drinking and smoking follow similar rules of exclusion. Those castes from whom all will eat are higher than those from whom none will eat. These features, of late are changing among the youths.

Caste was very intimately linked to occupation. For each caste had a traditional occupation. The villagers say that its members did that work in the past, if not in the present. so their doings proclaims their caste membership.

Kewat was the only family which use still to collect fish besides cultivation. Here in this village all are small farmers not being able to produce more for want of irrigation facilities. Thus we see that the agriculture in this village is in general the preserve of

small and medium owner cultivators. By far the major part of the land is self-farmed and tenancies exist largely when the plot of land is very small and the owner of out of the village.

### **Personal Relations**

The members of a caste within the village are first united by similarity of occupation, of rights in the land, of income and of ritual beliefs and practices.

Other ritual symbols, fairs, festivals and ceremonies also unite the members in the village.

In the village one may use kinship terms towards any with whom one has personal contact regardless of caste or economic status. Consideration is taken only of the person's age and young children are specially taught this habit.

Among people belonging to same caste and economic group kinship terms are applied systematically to each member of the interacting households. Friendship relations often takes place between members of such closely interacting households. Kinship ties ramify extensively in paternal and maternal lines. The joint family divides every generation and the local group of agnatic kin (kutumba) lacks real corporate unity and is bound only by the observation of death pollution. Houses and ancestral land are readily bought and sold.

There was a free primary school in the village but it has been shifted to other village because of the political reason in the year 2020 B. S. The children of the village go to Unwatch Panchayat which is about 3 km. away from here. Twenty-five boys and seven girls go to primary school in Unwatch daily.

There is only one young man in the village who had passed S. L. C. examination in 1977. He is teaching in a school at Losang. There are two boys who have passed class ten. One of them was working in Nepal Malaria Eradication Office till in 2032. He had to left the job because of the quarrel in the house regarding the dispute on the distribution of parental property.

Untouchables are allowed to fetch water from the well or the tube-well if it is outside the house. There are four hand-pipes and only one well in the village. The water here seems to have deficiency in iodine. Many men as noticed are the victims of hydrosil disease.

### **Religious Practices and Supernatural Power**

The castes living in the village are all profound believer of Hinduism. However they conceive of man as passing through life surrounded by a ghostly company of powers, elements, tendencies, mostly impersonal in character, shapeless phantasms of which no image can be made and no definite idea can be formed. Some of them presides over cholera, another over fever and another over cattle diseases. Some dwell in trees and riverside and forests, ponds and in plains. All of them most be propitiated by reason of the ills and evils. All the villagers believe that beauty, health, and children, good harvest, miseries and death are the effect of either the grace or displeasure of supernatural power. According to their traditions these customary beliefs are the outcome of femine, bad agricultural produce. Causes of death of their cattles and livestock, robbery of wealth and all other misfortunes. which they believe are the functions of these impersonal entities.

In the village there is a big mango

tree whose age is given as 40 years. Every year during the ripening of the fruit when people ride on that tree fall down and is killed. Such accidents have occurred in the past. The villager believe that there lives a wrestler's spirit called Bagaha which catches the persons and finishes them. During such period all the boys boil cow's milk and pour there and propitiate. The boys drink the remainder milk after it boils. Villagers believe that Bagaha also kills their cows and buffaloes, so they worship him with animal sacrifice annually.

The north corner of the village has a place where the village shrine kotahi is said to be in position. This kotahi goddess (Durga) is worship during the month of Ashwin (October). At the south-end of the village there lives the goddess Kali. She must be worshiped every year by the villagers. Sacrifice of animals like, goat, fowls are offered for the welfare of the villagers. There is also one goddess of the castes Chamar. She is called as Chamaria devi. Though she is the goddess of the Chamar only, othe villagers too worship her because of her ferocity. If she becomes angry all the domesticated animals die. She is offered a pig of 10 days old. Since animals are vital for agricultural life, they must be protected.

It is probable that in the past the primitive culture of the various castes inhabiting in the village was largely based upon what may be called as animism. But on account of their coming in closer contacts with the high castes Hindus, their gradual economic improvement and 'freedom' from traditional bondage, spread of new ideas through the radio, newspaper, cinema and increasing rate of political consciousness have together produced some effects on the old traditional way of life. The direction of change is radical

and the psychology of people is in search of a new horizon for all round development-cultural, social and economic in the village.

### **Attitude Towards Local Leaders and Panchayat**

Any offence, such as theft, adultery, assault, or encroachment on another's land, demands the attention of the Panchayat member, who haul the culprit before an assembly of Panchayats men and proceeds for the agreement. The attitude towards the Government is that it has not yet given them least facilities such as electricity, education, drinking water, health post and irrigation facilities.

The village is participating in Small Farmers Development Programme since 2038/39. The maximum they have profited from it is a few loan. Agriculture Development Bank gives them maximum loan of Rs. 2000/-. The loan given seems not to be sufficient and it is not properly utilized. There is a lack of active participation and motivation from bank side.

The village lacks every thing fro meducation, health to irrigation and agriculture facilities which is the main criteria for the rural development in Nepal.

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