

Research Note

A Note on the Religious Beliefs and Practices Among the Chepang of Nepal

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This paper deals with the social functions of religion i.e. the contribution that it makes to the formation and maintenance of a social order and social cohesion.

Ethnographic Setting

The particular group chosen for study is the Chepangs living in the Mahabharat ranges of Central Nepal, West of Kathmandu. This paper is based on field data collected in Mahadev Panchayat, Dhading District during April to September 1984. The Chepangs at present are known by the name of 'Praja' or 'Paraja'² the subjects of the king. They are a small group of a Tibeto-Burman language speaking people from the Mongoloid family who numbers about thirty-two thousand, distributed mainly in various hill village Panchayats of Chitawan, Gorkha, Dhading, and Makawanpur districts. They live along the steeper slopes of the Mahabharat range between altitudes of 2500 and 4000 ft. above sea level. The area is not easily accessible because of its precipitous mountain trails.

The Chepangs, like the people of many other ethnic groups of Nepal, believe in an unknown supernatural world. They have evolved a system of beliefs and practices through which they have established a close relationship with spirits who are believed to influence the destinies of mankind. They have inherited these beliefs and practices from their ancestors through which they enter into relation with various deities and spirits for their livelihood, security and prosperity. These beliefs and practices help to strengthen their social unity and contribute to the existence and maintenance of problems of survival for the primitive peoples like the Chepangs. In this context, the following questions were formulated:

- a. How do these beliefs help the Chepangs to survive in the infertile, drought-prone region of hill and forests?
- b. How do these protect the Chepangs from epidemics, wild animals, sickness and other calamities?
- c. In what way are the seasonal rites and festivals considered essential for ensuring the safety and prosperity of individual and the village community?

- d. Who should be the effective agent to mediate between the Chepang community and the supernatural powers?

Supernatural Powers

As is the case with other primitive societies, the Chepangs are preoccupied with and predominated by their own faiths and beliefs. They believe in some invisible supernatural beings and powers. Their beliefs in these powers and the ways of entering into relations with them constitute their religion. Their relationship with these supernatural spirits is one of veneration, fear, meekness, dependence, and propitiation. So various spirits are invoked to obtain their goodwill. "They believe in a type of religious magic, and by beating drums they call on their dead ancestors and their gods, both good or evil. They believe that the destinies and fortunes of mankind are influenced by supernatural spirits" (Caughley et al. 1971: 85). For the Chepangs the world is a vast sacred amphitheatre in which men, spirits, and impersonal powers are closely interrelated. "They are known as the most advanced exorcists (*Jhankris*) among all the communities of Nepal. Their superstitions go to such an extent that any malady, physical weakness, natural calamities like droughts, excessive rainfall, damage to crops, and so on are supposed to be the result of either the evil desire of the witches or that of the evil spirits. To do away with all these evils they beat drums throughout the night, chanting incantations and jumping up and down" (Varya 1971). But it is evident that these various beliefs and practices permeate every aspect of their life and help strengthen their social unity. They believe that mountains, rivers and trees are inhabited by various powers. It is very important for every household and village community to cultivate friendly relations with such supernatural powers, which is done through oblations and sacrifices. So the sole object of their worship is to avert disasters. When these spirits are pleased they bring delight and happiness to them.

Discussion

An attempt has been made to analyse some of the deities and spirits prevalent among the Chepangs and how their faiths and practices are closely related to their life-cycle ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and agricultural practices.

The Deities

The Chepangs worship a variety of deities. Of these the worship of *Namrung* (the hunting god), *Bhumi-Puja* (the earth deity) and *Gaidu-Puja*³ (worship for livestock) are considered most important.

The *Namrung* is a hunting god. As the Chepangs are hunters, hunting is essential for survival. Besides, it is believed that hunting should be done at least once a year otherwise the god *Namrung* may get infuriated and hurt people by bringing miseries. On a stipulated date after offering a chicken a group of Chepangs set out for hunting into the

jungle hoping for a successful hunt. Even after their successful hunt, they propitiate *Namrung* by offering the blood from the heart of the animal for their well-being. This adoration with the offerings is performed to tranquilize their hunting god. So the pleasure of *Namrung* facilitates hunting pursuits, provides the hunted object with ease and protects people from epidemics and other calamities.

The Chepangs observe *Bhumi-Puja*, the earth deity, before they sow maize in March. This propitiation is an agricultural festival which is to be observed by all for a rich agricultural production. The expectation of successful agricultural harvest in the coming year is the underlying belief of this ceremony. Unless the earth deity is appeased it is believed that crops will be ruined, and also misfortunes of various kinds will be brought upon them. So they make two small holes in the ground and fill one with the blood of a rooster and the other with water. They believe that if the substance of the holes remains as it is for a long time, they can predict favourable agriculture in the coming year. If the substance dries up soon it shows a negative impact in the agricultural production. So a good agricultural cycle is the sole desire of the Chepangs while worshipping *Bhumi-Puja*.

The Chepangs observe *Gaidu* and *Aitbare-Puja*.⁴ The *Gaidu-Puja* is observed by the Chepangs for the security and prosperity of cattle. It is observed during October-November. *Aitbare-Puja* is observed to keep them safe from epidemics, and it is observed around August-September. Both of them are supposed to be the benevolent gods. So they are considered important. Propitiation takes place generally with offerings of fowls, handfuls of rice and vermilion.

The worship of the above mentioned deities such as *Namrung Bhumi-Puja*, *Gaidu*, and *Aitbare* are essential for survival in the infertile hills and inspire the Chepangs to live happily in the midst of epidemics, wild animals, sickness and other calamities.

Life-Cycle Ceremonies and Related Deities

Rites of birth, marriage and death are the main rites of passage. In Hinduism, these are called the *Samskāras*. "The word, *samskāra* means religious purificatory rites and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and the intellect of an individual so that he becomes a full member of the community" (Dahal 1985: 83). Among the Chepangs there is no such term for *samskāra* which is observed from the moment of the *garbhadhana* (conception) to *antesthi* (death) of the individual. However, they also observe some of the ceremonies related to birth, name giving, food introducing, head shaving, marriage, and burial. After the performance of some of the ceremonies such as name-giving, food-eating, head-shaving, and marriage, a child acquires a definite status in the village and among its kin-folks. Besides, the funeral rites help the departed spirit to liberate itself from the underworld and to finally join the abode of its ancestors.

On the name-giving day, the Chepangs sprinkle cow's urine to purify the house and family members. The name of a child is chosen by the parents and the child is immediately fastened with a yellow thread around the wrist and waist to protect from evil spirits. They observe a simple ceremony at the time of the first food-giving to the child. On this occasion, the parents of the child and others relatives give *tikā* on the forehead of the child and wish it a long and happy life. They observe a first hair-cutting ceremony. The hair of the child is shaved by his maternal uncle. A man in the Chepang community achieves full status after his marriage. They consider marriage as indispensable and very much essential for fecundity. When a person dies, before carrying the dead body to the burial ground, it is ceremonially placed on the ground, and oil is rubbed all over its body. Coins are placed by sons on the mouth of the deceased. This is done in order to help the soul to pay the fees while crossing the river on the way to the land of the dead.

During the observation of these rituals and ceremonies, villagers get together and worship their ancestors, deities and spirits, and entertain with various food items. On the last day of a funeral ceremony, villagers, especially the relatives of the polluted family, attend the ceremony with various food items such as *jāda*, local beer, fowl, pickle, and bread. The offerings such as beer, balls of boiled rice, meat, and cigarettes are put on banana leaves for the soul of the deceased. It is widely believed in the Chepang region that the departed soul comes and eats the offerings. This death ceremony brings the world of spirits into their affinity. Besides, it promotes the feeling of co-operation, discipline, and interdependence among the members of a community.

The above-mentioned life-cycle ceremonies possess specific, protective and purificatory purposes, and are essential for keeping, continuing and strengthening the relations of mutual harmony, peace and dependence between the individual and the whole community.

Festivals

The Chepangs observe various seasonal festivals which are considered helpful for ensuring the safety and prosperity of the individual and the village community. Many of the Chepang festivals are similar to the Hindu such as *Dasain*, *Dīpāwalī* and *Samkrānti*.

Sāune-Samkrānti is an important festival and has a separate and indigenous identity among the Chepangs. Almost all the Chepangs undergo punishment from hunger each year from *Fālgun* to *Asada*. During this period they depend mainly on jungle products such as *pas* (*vyagur*), *hung* (*Bharlang*), *goi* (*yam*), *lak* (*Githa*) and *jyar* (*chuinya*). Their agricultural production is expected to maintain them hardly for six months from *Sraavan* to *Pausa*. However, the new crops are ready for harvest around *Sāune-Samkrānti*. So this festival, which falls on 1st *Srāvan*, is observed each year on the happy occasion of their triumph of keeping themselves

alive despite the problem of acute food shortage, famine, and distress. So this festival is observed with a nice preparation of buffalo meat and *jāda*. On the other hand, *Māghe-Sāmkranti* which is observed on 1st *Māgh* is just the opposite to *Sāune-Samkranti* because it is connected with their coming sorrowful days of famine and distress. It is their belief that, since that day their food stock is supposed to be exhausted, they are supposed to go to jungle for food-gathering and face hardships. They enjoy themselves by feasting with their sisters as they are not sure whether they will meet together again in the coming year. This festival anticipates their coming sorrowful days of famine and distress which last from *Māgha* to *Srāvan*.

The Chepangs observe *Chhonam*⁵ (*nwagi*) as a concluding rite after their main agricultural activities but *Bhumi-Puja* as an introductory or inaugural rite before agricultural activities. *Chhonam* (*nwagi*) is the most important festival of the Chepangs. It is related to their agricultural activity. *Chhonam* is the auspicious occasion on which a new harvest is eaten. The Chepangs are prohibited from eating some of their agricultural products such as *ghaiya*, *pindoula*, *ghniroula*, and sour fruits like *nibuwā* without making an offering to their ancestors. This festival falls on the full-moon during *Bhādra* and is generally observed on a stipulated date according to their convenience. Generally, each member of a clan gathers at the house of the oldest member in the village and observes it. This gathering is arranged at the house of *Pānde*, their priest, with a bunch of ripe rice plants, fruits, and *jāda*. One corner of the house is smeared with a mixture of cowdung and soil and many offerings like rice plants, banana, rice and other things are put on the ground. They offer incense and *diyo* (oil lamp). The *Pānde*, the priest, has his head shaved, takes a bath to purify himself and starts beating his *ringk* (one-faced drum); sitting on the sanctified mat then he begins his *falakne* (muttering) incoherently. He shudders a lot and invites the ancestors to a feast prepared from the new harvest. The next morning the *Pānde* stops beating the drum and sacrifices a cock for the ancestors. The Chepangs consider ancestors intermediate between gods and living men, and an intermediary role is played by the *Pānde*. The invitation to a feast from the new harvest and prohibition from eating certain agricultural products before offering them to their ancestors are the main features of this festival. So this festival is considered to be one of the factors which contributes towards ensuring the safety and prosperity of the individual and the village community.

The ancestor worship among the Chepangs is full of rituals in honour of the dead. They look up to their ancestors' spirits with filial love and intimacy. Like most primitive people they believe in survival of the soul after death. So they propitiate the spirits of ancestors, treat them with veneration and believe in their rebirth. In fact, their mediation for reconciliation is sought. They keep the memory of the dead alive. Among the Chepangs the living and the dead of the same lineage stand in a close relationship, forming one family. The dead are believed to assist in times of crisis. It is believed

that conventional tributes must be paid to them. Failure to do so may result in those generally benevolent becoming malevolent. It is almost a duty of the spirits of the departed to supervise the well-being of their living family members. So ancestor worship is a strong factor in the Chepang social solidarity and continuity of family life and tradition.

Pānde

For Chepangs a *Pānde* is just like a *Jhānkri* in other ethnic groups of Nepal. He is a key-person among the Chepangs, because his presence in most of the social and religious activities such as the name-giving ceremony for a new baby, worship of a clan deity, purification day, and many other significant occasions, is a must. If anybody is ill, the *Pānde* is invited to find out which god or ghost has caused sickness and to cure it by beating his one-sided drum. This beating continues for the whole night preventing the patient from sleeping (Caughley et al. 1971: 85). According to the instruction of the *Pānde*, one offers fowl, swine, and even goats wishing one's well-being. If a person falls sick the consultation is done soon with the *Pānde* and his instructions are accepted whole-heartedly. Not only are his services indispensable for propitiating gods and spirits, he himself is endowed with superhuman powers. His magico-religious practices come into operation for the diagnosis and treatment of all kinds of illness. They believe that sickness is caused by certain deities, such as spirits of witchcraft. They counteract it by exorcism. For all those purposes the *Pānde* invokes and propitiates various deities and ancestors. He is supposed to cure a patient by his spiritual incantation. In addition to this, he spells some incantation to poison the river water which helps the Chepangs to fish. If necessary he retrieves the effectiveness of poison if it is not strong enough with the touch of an impure woman or glance of an evil eye. Besides, his participation in hunting is lucrative and is honoured by an extra share after the group's successful hunt.

A *Pānde* has a filial affection with his one-faced drum called which is made from the wood of *buchiko-sing*, a kind of tree and the skin of a goat. According to the Chepang belief, the *Pānde* and his *ring* work as husband and wife who have promised to devote themselves to the well-being of the people. A *Pānde* is a self-made personality with blessings from god. "Exorcism is, however, neither taught nor learnt by anyone, as the teaching and learning of such arts are totally tabooed. They learn them by themselves when they are in bed in dreams, they are taught by their deities" (Varya: 1972).

A *Pānde* is an interceder between the dead and the living, a mediator between the Chepang community and supernatural powers and a central figure among the community members. His presence, in most of the socio-religious activities, plays an important role in keeping peace, prosperity and unity among the Chepangs. His magico-religious performances show how they are helpful and essential in maintaining social solidarity, to connect the present with the past and inspire members of the community to live together harmoniously.

Conclusion

This paper shows that the religico-migical faiths and practices make the Chepangs optimistic and resistant to hostile forces of nature. Their faith, rituals, and magical rites keep them bold and fearless, and they are helpful in harbouring amiable and amicable connexions with the deities, spirits, and other supernatural powers deemed necessary for their existence.

The festivals and ceremonies of the Chepangs are occasions of community participation and reciporcity which help in maintaining their social order and social solidarity. In brief, the social functions of rites and ceremonies enable them to attract the natural forces into their favour and support. Besides, they are supportive in their vindication and power to encounter the natural environment, and these meet their survival needs. This descriptive functionalist analysis of the religion of the Chepangs shows similarity with Malinowski's (1948) theory of the social functions of religion which posits religion as part of a culture with certain functions for the fulfilment of human needs and for the provision of solutions to certain difficulties and problems. Besides this, the religious beliefs and practices of the Chepangs look clearly akin to what Redcliffe-Brown has expressed in regard to religion:

In all ages men have hoped that by the proper performance of religious actions or observances they would obtain some specific benefit; health and long life, children to carry on their line, material well-being, success in hunting, rain, the growth of crops and the multiplication of cattle, victory in war, admission of their souls after death to a paradise or inversely, release by the extinction of personality from the round of reincarnation. (Redcliffe - Brown, 1952: 153).

This paper shows that the entire circle of the Chepang life is dominated by religious beliefs and practices. All such beliefs and faith in supernatural power, the dependence of the Chepangs community on such power and their veneration of it constitute the structure of the Chepang religion.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Dr. D.R. Dahal for his encouraging comments and suggestions in preparing this article.
2. The term *Prajā* is applied to Chepangs, Kusundas, Darais, Kumhals, Majhis and Parghartis of Central and Eastern Nepal. *Prajā* is clearly a term which has been used along with ethnic names since at least the Malla period of Nepalese history (Rai, 1985: 1).

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3. Name of the god of cowherd (to whom milk and ghee are offered in worship on the full-moon day of *Mangsir* and *Jeth*) ef. *The Rising Nepal*, 14 July, 1971.
4. Name of a god and name of a ceremony performed on Sunday. ef. *The Rising Nepal*, 14 July 1971.
5. This tribal festival is widely prevalent among the Chepangs, and it is generally observed on different days in different hamlets.

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