

Castes among the Newars. The Debate between Colin Rosser and Declan Quigley on the Status of Shrestha

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My aim is to present a discussion on caste among the Newars, focusing on the debate about the status of the Shrestha between two scholars: Colin Rosser and Declan Quigley¹. Colin Rosser is among the earliest scholars who carried out anthropological study on the Newar society and presented interesting discussion on their castes and the status of the Shrestha. Declan Quigley later conducted field research among the Newars in the eighties, and, finding Rosser's views on the status of Shrestha controversial, he criticised them in several articles. In these pages, I shall provide a short description of the Newar castes before presenting both scholars' viewpoints. Finally, I will offer my own view, based on my research in Sankhu and on my own experience as being a Shrestha.²

The complexity and ambiguity of the caste systems on the Indian subcontinent proved one of the most fascinating subjects for scholars involved in this region in the past century and will remain so for many years to come. From Bouglé to Hocart, Weber to Dumont and Dumont to Quigley, the discussion on castes continued without a break, so that a vast literature dealing with this question is now at our disposition.³ Among recent publications, Declan Quigley's *Interpretation of Caste* can be considered one of the most remarkable because it provides a dynamic discussion of caste in the Indian sub-continent.

¹ David Gellner, Gérard Toffin, Peter Webster and many other scholars have written on the Newars and their castes. For the present purpose, however, I shall restrict myself to the debate between Colin Rosser and Declan Quigley.

² Discussion on castes presented here is basically drawn from my PhD research (Shrestha 2002). I would like to acknowledge the Research School CNWS, Leiden, The Netherlands for the excellent opportunity that I received to accomplish my dissertation at Leiden (1996-2002). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Workshop: *Themes in Newar Culture, History, and Identity* at University of London (SOAS), London, UK on June 30, 2003. I am indebted to Dr. David Gellner, the convener of the workshop and to the other scholars present at the workshop for their helpful comments on my paper. I am grateful to Dr. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine and Dr. Philippe Ramirez of CNRS Himalaya, France for their helpful comments to earlier drafts of this paper.

³ See Bouglé (1908), Hocart (1950), Weber (Gerth & Mills 1948: 396-415), and Dumont (1966). Among the major recent publications are Srinivas (1996), Fuller (ed.) (1996), Das (1977), Parry (1979), Raheja (1988a and 1988b).

The Newar Castes

The Newar society is hierarchically divided into various castes. A nineteenth century chronicle, the *Bhaṣāvamśāvalī*, credits the fourteenth century king Jayasthiti Malla for introducing the caste system into the Nepal Valley.⁴ However, Nepalese historians showed that the caste system already existed in Nepal during the Licchavi rule (5th to 8th century) and that King Jayasthiti Malla only reinforced or restructured it.⁵ For this purpose, several Brahmins from India who were masters of Hindu scriptures assisted him. According to the *Bhaṣāvamśāvalī* together with their subcastes, a total of 725 different castes were created during the reign of King Jaysthiti Malla. However, the *Bhaṣāvamśāvalī* does not provide their names and only presents some detailed regulations for 53 different castes. Hodgson, Hamilton, and Oldfield distinguished between Hindu and Buddhist Newar castes.⁶ Chattopadhyay provided a more detailed treatment of Newar castes.⁷ He not only critically treated and compared the lists of Hodgson, Hamilton, Oldfield and Levi, but also compared them with other caste systems of the region. Chattopadhyay, who was entirely dependent on textual sources, saw that the lists he found did not match with each other and that the duties described for many castes were inaccurate. Regmi also elaborately discussed Newar caste structure and presented its historical background.⁸

Despite the Brahminical basis of the Newar caste structure, it is difficult to apply the four hierarchical orders of Brahman, Kṣetri, Vaiśya and Śūdra to the Newars. The adoption of the Hindu caste structure by the Newar Buddhists is also not easily explained, because, in principle, Buddhists oppose the Hindu caste system. The Vajracarya and the Sakya as the top Buddhist priestly castes parallel the Hindu Brahmin priests. Therefore, Gellner rightly stated that Newar society is double-headed because of these two different priestly castes.⁹ As the Vajracarya perform

⁴ See Lamsal (1966: 37-50).

⁵ See Panta (1964: 1-10), Sharma (1997: 13-17) also holds this view. See also Regmi (1965) and Greenwold (1975: 56-7) for further discussion on the origin of caste system in Nepal.

⁶ See Hodgson collected manuscripts (Vol 60, pp. 135-8, 146-50 and Vol 51, pp. 176-80). Oldfield (1880: 177-188) presents 68 different castes. Hamilton lists (1986: 31-38) several Newar castes.

⁷ See Chattopadhyay (1923: 46-119) appendixes A, B, C, D and E.

⁸ See D. Regmi (1965: 641-706).

⁹ See Gellner (1992: 43-45).

priestly duties, people consider them as Buddhist Brahmins.¹⁰ Below the Brahmins and Vajracarya are other high castes called Syasyah (Joshi, Pradhan and Shrestha); below them are middle and lower castes and “unclean” and “untouchable” castes. It may be said that the hierarchical levels of the Newar castes are numerous. However, their ranking will remain a matter of dispute because claims and counter claims of positions remain unresolved.

Before the Gorkha conquest, a social stratification existed, but there was no written legal code until the implementation of the first legal code of Nepal (*Muluki Ain*) in 1854 AD. This code subordinates all the Newar castes to the Parvatiya castes despite the Newar’s own caste stratification.¹¹ It ranks the Newar Brahmins not only below the Parvatiya Brahmins but also below the Ksetris, and ranks the Newar Brahmins above all other Newar castes including the Buddhist Vajracarya priests.¹² Though the Newar Brahmins are legally ranked below the Parvatiya Brahmins, they claim a higher position than them and prohibit marriage with them. In case of such a marriage, the children are prohibited to perform priestly tasks for high caste Newars. Newar Brahmins are relatively few in number and share their priestly tasks with non-Brahmin assistants: the Joshi astrologers and the Karmacarya.¹³ This apparent lack of unitary hierarchy, perhaps, led Dumont to state that the Newars do not have a caste system.¹⁴

So far, no written evidence has yet been traced to define the exact structure of the caste system during the Malla period (thirteenth to eighteenth century). However, the nineteenth century chronicles, which are believed to have been written for the new rulers of Nepal to understand the Newars, describe it. The 1854 legal code came only after Prime Minister Jung Bahadur’s returned from England and Sharma assumes that it was inspired by this visit.¹⁵ In the matter of caste stratification and caste-bound duties, the 1854 law is very detailed and

¹⁰ See Greenwold (1974a: 101-23 and 1978: 483-504). Greenwold (1974b: 129-49) discusses more on Newar Buddhist priests, their ritual initiation and Buddhism in Nepal.

¹¹ All Newars were ranked in the Matawali or alcohol-consuming category. The category was considered the Shudra, the lowest among the four *varṇa* of the Hindu society. See Sharma (1977: 284). Nepali (1987: 319-20) presents eight hierarchical levels for all castes and ethnic groups of Nepal.

¹² Höfer (1979: 45) provides a ranking order of Newar castes among other Nepalese castes in his study of the 1854 legal code.

¹³ In Kathmandu, the Karmacarya are also in charge of the temple of the royal goddess Taleju.

¹⁴ Dumont (1964: 98).

¹⁵ Sharma (1977: 278).

defines the punishments for misbehaviour by each caste.¹⁶ Until the New Legal Code (*Nāyaṃ Muluki Ain*) of Nepal in 1964 was introduced, the 1854 legal code continued to prevail, with amendments.¹⁷ Then, all restrictions regarding castes have lost their legal ground, but it did not prevent people from continuing their traditional beliefs. Therefore, despite the New Legal Code, traditional caste distinctions continue till today, which can clearly be seen in villages or small towns like Sankhu, and in a lesser degree in the cities of Kathmandu and Patan.

Fürer-Haimendorf provided the first field-based anthropological discourse on Newar society and discussed in detail its castes and hierarchy.¹⁸ He distinguished only four castes: the Deo Brahmin, Jha Brahmin, the Syasyaḥ (Sheshyo) and the Jogi as Hindu while considering the rest as Buddhist castes. He rightly noted that all the Newars were pollution-conscious and maintenance of caste-status was common even among the Buddhists.¹⁹ Discussing caste hierarchies among the Newars, Rosser put them into two categories as dominant block (*ju pim>jyupim*) and subordinate block (*ma ju pim>majyupim*), and in the first category he listed six levels and in the latter three.²⁰ His table provides 26 different castes in Newar society, which he gathered from his survey of the 33 Newar settlements in the Kathmandu Valley.²¹ He saw a growing trend among the Shrestha of substituting their Gubhaju priests for Brahmins.²²

Gopal Singh Nepali was the earliest to provide an in-depth view on Newar social life and culture in his book *The Newars*. Nepali divided their caste system into six hierarchical blocks with twelve levels.²³ Gutschow and Kölver presented a list of Newar castes from Bhaktapur, which ranks them into nineteen levels.²⁴ Gérard Toffin presented a more elaborate list of Newar castes in a hierarchical order.²⁵ In Panauti, he recorded fifteen

¹⁶ Macdonald (1983: 281-308) presents English translations of the code with comments on the law made for the lower castes. See also (Höfer 1979).

¹⁷ Pertaining to marriage, lifecycle rituals and divorce, the 1854 Legal Code and its later amendments (1936, 1948 and 1952), which was in effect until the 1964 Legal Code was implemented, provides special regulations for different Newars castes. See Regmi (1978: 21-48) appendixes 1, 2 and 3.

¹⁸ Von Fürer-Haimendorf (1956: 15-38).

¹⁹ Von Fürer-Haimendorf (1956: 23).

²⁰ Rosser (1979: 89).

²¹ Rosser (1979: 85-86).

²² Rosser (1979: 104).

²³ Nepali (1965: 150).

²⁴ Gutschow & Kölver (1975: 56-58) say the ranking is from the Rajopadhyay's viewpoint.

²⁵ Toffin's (1984: 231, table XIII) list contains 34 castes but these days some of them are not to be found anymore.

Newar castes and considered ten as “pure” and three as “impure”. He classified the “pure” into three and “impure” into two hierarchical levels.²⁶ Presenting micro status levels (*thar*) of Newar Hindus in Bhaktapur, Levy listed 31 castes in a hierarchical manner. He distinguished three levels of Syasyah and three levels of Jyapu and put the third category of Syasyah even below the Jyapu, which is controversial.²⁷ More dynamic views on Newar castes have been elaborated in the study entitled *Contested Hierarchies*, and characterised by its editors (D. Gellner and D. Quigley 1995) as a “collaborative ethnography of caste among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.”²⁸ Parish’s *Hierarchy and its Discontents* is another intriguing study on the Newars with regard to caste complexity. Discussing Newar caste stratification, Parish shows sociological and psychological contradictions between untouchable and high castes.²⁹ Gellner presents a pyramidal image of the caste hierarchies dividing them into six different levels.³⁰ Sharma also ranks the castes into a similar hierarchical chart.³¹

Among the clean castes, there exist several internal layers and traditional hierarchies. These caste hierarchies can be discovered when a marriage partner is selected. The Newar castes maintain caste-endogamy, although hypergamy is allowed. Inter-caste marriage is a transgression of rules, and if a girl marries somebody lower than her own caste, she loses her former caste. In case a man from a higher caste marries a girl from a lower caste, their children belong to the mother’s caste. A marriage between a clean and an unclean caste turns out more stigmatising for the higher caste, if it is a man who has taken a girl of lower birth.³² After the implementation of the New Legal code (*Nayam Muluki Ain*) of Nepal in 1964 liberal changes have been taking place, but the concept of higher and lower caste is still prevalent among the Newars. Especially in small towns like Sankhu, caste stigmatisation and caste discrimination is still obviously apparent. However, the degree of social control depends on a person’s social and economic status.

²⁶ Toffin (1984: 278-9, table XV).

²⁷ See Levy (1992: 78-85).

²⁸ See Gellner (1992). See Gellner & Quigley (1995).

²⁹ See Parish (1997).

³⁰ Gellner (1995: 17) and (1992: 41-6). Nepali (1987: 320-1) presents six hierarchical levels but considers Duiṃ and Bhā unclean castes.

³¹ See Sharma (1997: 131-2).

³² Anil Sakya (2000) presents an interesting discussion on caste and kinship among the Newars in southern Kathmandu in relation to marriage.

Caste hierarchy

In the traditional Newar settlements, like Sankhu, hierarchical order of castes is still apparent, even if it is disputed. In Sankhu, different castes dining together was taboo in the past. Nowadays, those castes that accept water from each other do not mind eating together anymore when they observe communal feasts such as marriage or other ritual initiation feasts. This change has taken place during the last two to three decades. However, eating rice cooked in the kitchen of a lower caste remains a taboo for many castes. Especially people from the old generation hardly eat cooked rice from other kitchens. The Syasaḥ (Joshi, Pradhan, Rajbhandari, Malla, Maske and Shrestha), finds it impure to eat cooked rice from any other caste than their own. In this regard, Owens' observation concerning commensality is still relevant. He distinguished three different levels: those with whom one may share cooked rice (*jā cale jupim*) or members of the same caste, those who share only feast food (*bhvay cale jupim*) and those from whom one may not drink water (*la cale majupim*).³³ In Sankhu, accepting cooked rice from the Vajracarya is not common, even though they are respected as priests and are given the honorific term *bijyāye* as are Rajopadhyay priests. Some Shrestha even consider the Vajracarya lower in rank than them. On the other hand, the Vajracarya priests do not accept cooked rice from the Shrestha either.

The change of caste status from Jyapu to Shrestha status is still unimaginable in Sankhu as elsewhere in the Valley as Quigley and Webster stressed. Among the castes ranked below the Syasya' and above the "unclean" castes, the ranking is not without controversy, because each of them claims a higher position. Thus in Sankhu, the Malla Khacarā classify the Jyapu below them, while the Jyapu consider the opposite. Both are strict about marriage relations. Between Prajapati and Jyapu there is no restriction left for inter-marriage or inter-dining. In the past, the former used to claim a higher position than the latter, the Bhā claimed a higher position than the Jyapu, and so did the Gathu. However, such claims are not recognised by others. Most commonly, seven castes: Chipā, Bhā, Sāymi, Gathu, Nau, Kau and Duiṃ, whose toenails are cut or ritually purified by the Nāy, used to be considered of the same rank,³⁴ but claims and counter-claims on one's position in the system is common between these castes. Although all these castes may claim a higher position to one another, today they still restrain from inter-marriage with other castes

³³ See Owens (1989: 78-9). Allen (1993: 11-8) argues that both hierarchy and complementarity existed in Newar eating arrangement.

³⁴ Among the Nau, cutting of toenails or ritual purification is carried out by their own caste.

and endogamy is preferred. Among the younger generation, conservative caste rules are rapidly vanishing, either because of school-education or of western influences.

In the past, Nāju were considered an unclean caste and were not permitted to fetch water from the wells. Now, no such restrictions are left for them. Among the three unclean castes: the Nāy, Jogi, Danyā and Doṃ, it is common for each to claim a higher position, but generally higher castes consider the Nay first, then the Jogi and the Doṃ. The Dyolā are considered the lowest Newar caste in Sankhu and there are no Cyāmkhalah and Hālāhulu castes in Sankhu. However, Dyola in Sankhu talk about Cyamkhalah and Halahulu as their subordinates because they do not want to find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The Shrestha or Syasyah

Before we enter into the debate on the status of the Shrestha between Rosser and Quigley it is appropriate to elaborate about the Shrestha caste itself. In Newar society the Shrestha are ranked below the priestly caste Rajopadhyay Brahman. As we know, *śreṣṭha* is a Sanskrit word adopted by the Newar high caste Syasyah. *Śreṣṭha* simply means the best or excellent. It is believed that the word Shrestha is derived from the Newar word Syasyah, which itself is derivation of a Sanskrit word *śyasta*. The first use of the word *śyasta* is found in the oldest chronicle of Nepal, the Gopālarājavaṃśāvaī, which dates from fourteenth century. The translators of the text spelled this word as Shrestha.³⁵ When exactly the word Shrestha was popularised among the Newar is still a matter of debate. Shrestha was a title given to those who served as administrators at the Malla courts. Although many Syasyah began to adopt Shrestha as their caste name as early as the eighteenth century, it has become more common from the 1950s. Although the Shrestha are renowned as traders and administrators, they are found engaged in all sorts of occupations. A large section of them are farmers, especially in rural areas. For instance, in Sankhu, the Shrestha occupy the largest area of land (67.3%), which is natural because they form the most numerous group. Among the Newars, the Shrestha are considered to be the most educated caste. Shrestha are employed in governmental and non-governmental organisations, banks, schools, universities, industries and private sectors. Many of them also occupy high-ranking administrative positions at governmental and non-governmental organisations. They also come among the top ranking businessmen in Nepal.

³⁵ Vajracarya & Malla (1985: 119, 164 and folio 63a)

Shrestha are to be found as the patrons of many rituals performed in the Newar settlements because of their affluent position. They are responsible to perform or organise many rituals and processions of gods and goddesses.

The network of inter-caste relationships in the Newar society circles around the Shrestha; both the Rajopadhyay and the Vajracarya provide priestly services to them in their various domestic rituals and worships, while Joshi attend them as astrologers and priests. The Nau serve them as nail cutters and barbers, the Jyapu as labourers, cremators and messengers, the Gathu as flower suppliers, the Jogi as food collectors offered to deceased and as musicians, the Nāy as butchers and the Dyolā as cleaners.

In the past, all the Syasyah used their clan names (*kunām*) or nicknames (*benām*). All the Shrestha families have nicknames in Sankhu and they are still known by these names. However, many find it embarrassing to use them. According to Baikuntha Prasad Lakaul, an old Newar academician, Newar families used to receive nicknames from their society: when an absurd incident took place in a family, that family began to be known by that incident.³⁶

Unlike other Newar castes, the Shrestha are found in every district of Nepal. One of the reasons behind it is the adoption of “Shrestha” as one’s surname once a family belonging to any of the Newar caste moves to settle far off places from the Kathmandu Valley. Keshav Man Sakya (2004) has recorded several such cases in eastern Nepal. He also found “Shrestha” surname is equated to all the Newars in the areas he visited in the East Nepal. He found out that Sakya, Vajracarya, Prajapati, Jyapu and Jogi all adopted Shrestha as their caste name. He also noticed that crossbreed children begot from Newar and Rai or Newar and Bahun also adopted Shrestha as their caste name. He believes that the Shrestha are the most accommodating castes in Newar society, which enabled them to spread throughout the country. Outside Nepal, for instance in Darjeeling, Sikkim and elsewhere in India, almost all the Newar used Pradhan, another surname of the Syasyah, as their surname. Recently however, there is a growing trend among the Newars in Sikkim to replace Pradhan with Shrestha. In Nepal, the Pradhan claim a higher position than the Shrestha and consider them as a diluted caste because anyone may claim being a Shrestha. In India, however, the case is different, because all the Newars were called Pradhan. The status of the Pradhan was not without debate in Darjeeling in the early days. When there was a dispute between two rival groups claiming higher status one over the other in Darjeeling, in

³⁶ Personal communication from Mr. Lakaul in 1993, aged 100 in 2005.

connection with court proceedings in Darjeeling, Nepalese authorities had to write a letter stating, “Pradhan is among the highest classes of the Newars.”³⁷ The Newars of Nepal see the status and purity of Pradhan from Sikkim and Darjeeling with doubt as they do with the Shrestha in Nepal.

Although there are no exact data about Newar castes for the whole of Nepal, the Shrestha are believed to be the second largest in number after the Jyapu. In the town of Sankhu, they form the largest group with 442 households and 3,202 people.

Among the Newar castes, the Shrestha are the most controversial, because of their unclear internal hierarchies. Colin Rosser noted six or seven ambiguous levels of Shrestha.³⁸ However, many scholars who conducted their research later refuted his supposition. Among them, Declan Quigley discussed the Shrestha caste at length.³⁹

Colin Rosser’s view

Colin Rosser was among the first anthropologists who came to Nepal after the Kathmandu Valley was made accessible to the outside world. The first field-based materials on the Newars, however, were collected by Fűr-Haimendorf and published as: “Elements of Newar Social Structure” (1956). His study is enlightening in the sense that he succeeded in providing a deep view on the Newar society for the first time. However, it includes a number of misinformation, which complicated the matter for the later researchers. For instance, his distinction of Hindu and Buddhist castes by examining the employment of family priests was misleading, because inviting either a Hindu or a Buddhist priest or both according to need is a common practice among the Newars. Gopal Singh Nepali, the author of the first monograph *The Newars* (1965) provided more exhaustive materials. Finally, Rosser’s essay “Social Mobility in the Newar Caste System” (1966) provided intriguing views on the complicated Newar caste structure and presumed the probability of upward mobility among the Newar castes especially from the Jyapu to the Shrestha, which became the topic of debate for the researchers for many years to come. Most importantly, it saw remarkable criticism from Declan Quigley in several of his essays. Therefore, I felt it is timely now to evaluate their debate from the side of a native Shrestha.

³⁷ The author did not provide exact year of the incident, but from his description it can be gathered that his recall was from the AD 1930s (Singh 1991: 102, also 97-99).

³⁸ See Rosser (1966: 101). Owens (1989: 84) also presents different categories of Shrestha.

³⁹ See Quigley (1994: 80-108 and 1996: 69-84). See also Webster (1993: 406-424).

Rosser's essay "Social Mobility in the Newar Caste System" was first published in 1966 in the Fürer-Haimendorf edited volume *Caste & Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*.⁴⁰ This 72 pages long article proved to become the only that Rosser ever wrote from his study on the Newars, but this powerful essay has immortalized him through numerous new researches on the Newars. It provides a detailed view on Newar caste stratification and their social value. For Rosser, "caste" simply means "social stratification" (p. 69) and "status positions" derive "from the distribution of political and economic power within that system." He was clear in saying that "it is incredibly difficult if not impossible to identify the vast bulk of the Newar population as being either Hindu or Buddhist." (p. 79) However, he saw that "Hinduism had effected notably raising the prestige (and of course the tangible rewards) of the Hindu Newars in particular the Shrestha merchants and depressing the status of Newar Buddhism particularly the Gubhaju priests." (p. 82)

His table 1 lists 26 Newar castes in a hierarchical order but he was straightforward in saying that it was his arbitrary decision. He includes estimation of household numbers for each Newar caste for 33 settlements that he studied in the Valley, except for Kathmandu and Patan. In October 1999, when I had a chance to interview Rosser in UK, he said that the number of households and population for the castes he presented were not exact because they were just estimations from his sample survey. His Table 2 presents "Dominant block (*ju pim*)" and Subordinate block (*ma ju pim*)" for ritual hierarchy with a rough and approximate picture of the caste stereotypes, but he was aware of the fact that such a categorization was disputable. He rightly said, "in a small community where everyone is personally known to everyone else, every individual's caste membership is a matter of common knowledge" (p. 89). He assumed on the other hand that identification of caste was not an easy task "in the crowded streets of a large urban centre such as Kathmandu or in the other Newar towns..." (p. 89). He finally states that:

"From every Newar's personal name it is possible to identify his caste at once. Once his name is known he is no longer anonymous, simply a Newar: he becomes immediately identified as a member of a particular caste to whom one behaves with a certain deference and respect or alternatively with authority and superiority." (p. 89)

Despite this ground reality, Rosser believes that "individual social mobility among Newars" was common. To prove this argument he imagined four hypothetical steps for all stratified societies (p. 91-2):

⁴⁰ Later reprinted in India in 1979.

1. A public claim to equality with person of higher status
2. Modification or adjustment of behaviour to conform with that current among the higher status group aspired to.
3. Rejection of former peers of lower status and severance or minimization of interaction with them
4. Acceptance by the higher status group demonstrated and confirmed by social interaction with them on terms of equality.

He argued that completing these four steps for successful social advancement in a particular case can be achieved:

“Among Newars this process of individual mobility across the barriers of caste occurs predominantly and commonly at particular point in scale (at the point separating the large merchant caste of Shresthas from the even larger farming caste of Jyapus who come immediately below them in the scale of ritual precedence) though it is not confined to this point.” (p. 92).

He further added:

“Firstly they drop their former Jyapu surname and take to calling themselves “Shrestha” (p. 94).The second stage is the copying of the customary culture behaviour diacritically distinctive of the Shresthas as a caste group (p. 95). ...The third essential stage in this process is rejection of former peers of lower status. A Jyapu en route to becoming a Shrestha must quit Jyapu associations and seek membership of Shrestha Associations (p. 96). ... Finally we come to the ultimate obstacle-marriage. But by this stage of the process is set for the arrangement of the “favourable alliances, which will set the seal of success on this programme of individual social advancement. To achieve his goal, the new “Shrestha” must obtain Shrestha daughters for his sons or of course a bride for himself, and give his daughters equally to Shresthas in return (p. 98). “

Rosser claimed that this process of individual mobility between the Jyapu and Shrestha was sufficiently common among Newars. He noted that a Jyapu claiming himself a Shrestha could never make a chance to have a Shrestha bride for himself or his sons if he failed to obtain membership in a Shrestha *sīguthi*, funeral association. He assumed that a Jyapu who claim himself a Shrestha obtains membership in a Shrestha *sīguthi* of low grade Shrestha by bribing them financially, but makes no chance in obtaining membership in a high grade Shrestha *sīguthi*.

Regarding status of the Shrestha, his “Table 3-Structure of Shrestha and Jyapu Castes” in Bhadgaon is very interesting. It presents four or five ambiguous levels of Shrestha, namely Chathari, Pām̄cathari, Cārthari, Sāretinthari and just Shrestha including their number of households. If we should count those in between Chathari and Pamcathari, and Jyapu

claiming “Shrestha” the total levels will be seven. We shall reproduce his Table 3 below:

Structure of Shrestha and Jyapu castes in Bhatgaon

Caste	Status Grade	No. of Households
Shrestha	A Chathare	437
	A/B doubtful A Status	174
	B Panchthare	340
	C Charthare Saretinthare	266
	D “Shrestha”	155
	Total Shrestha	1,372
Jyapu	A Jyapu claiming “Shrestha”	242
	B Jyapu	2,645
	C Sikami (carpenters)	198
	D Kuma (potters)	305
	Total Jyapu	3,390

Rosser’s various levels of Shrestha troubled researchers such as Declan Quigley, who was unable to find so many ambiguous layers among them.

Declan Quigley’s views

Quigley began his research among the Newars for his PhD at the beginning of 1980s. He contributed a number of important articles on the Newars besides his PhD thesis. For the present purpose we do not go into detail on his contributions to Newar studies but we just pick up some of his articles, which carry criticism on Rosser’s views, specifically on the status of Shresthas. Quigley’s first criticism on Rosser’s view came in his “Introversion and isogamy: marriage patterns of the Newars of Nepal” (1986). In this paper, Quigley disagrees with Rosser about the cross-caste mobility from Jyapu to Shrestha. However, he agrees to the existence of mobility among various levels of Shrestha. Thus, he argues in length in several of his articles that mobility between *chathare* (six clan) and *pāñcathare* (five clan) does exist, but does not find the other levels, which Rosser suggested for the Shrestha, such as *cārthare* (four clans) and *sāretinthare* (three and a half clans). Quigley assumes that Rosser’s informants may have invented such levels to ridicule certain families (p. 81). Quigley also finds Rosser’s four steps towards elevating individual wealthy Jyapu into Shrestha inapplicable. His field data does not support

such mobility of castes, especially the upward mobility between Jyapu and Shrestha. He is not convinced that wealthy Jyapu can obtain membership in Shrestha *śiḡuthi*, by investing wealth in it. He also found it impossible to get marriage alliances between Shrestha and Jyapu.

In his next paper, “Ethnicity Without Nationalism: the Newars of Nepal” (1987), while agreeing the adoption of “Shrestha” surname by many, Quigley (p.161) reasserts his earlier assessment that none of the four steps Rosser presumes are possible in practice unless “one moves to a new settlement and completely severs one’s previous lineage and affinal connections” (p. 163).

About the status of the Shrestha, Quigley’s opinion can be considered as close to Rosser’s view. In his book *The Interpretation of Caste* Quigley writes:

“As with the Rajputs, however, it is extremely hazardous to describe the Shresthas as single caste. ...Newars often say that nowadays anyone can call himself a Shrestha. ...There are two main bases on which claims to Shrestha status in general, and to membership of a particular sub-division, are made. The first is genealogy-kinship and marriage connections; the second is economic standing.” (1993: 103).

This means that though Quigley does not agree with Rosser’s theory of Jyapu upgrading themselves to Shrestha caste, he does agree with some of the steps described by Rosser about caste mobility for those who claim themselves Shrestha. As Rosser, he asserts “half Shrestha” or “half-caste Shrestha”.

Quigley’s dispute with Rosser’s assumptions continues in his next essay: “Social mobility and social Fragmentation in the Newar Caste System” (1996), where he provides three basic arguments to refute Rosser’s view:

1. because neither Shrestha nor Jyapu are or ever have been castes in the same way that other Newar castes are;
2. because most mobility occurs not between Jyapu and Shrestha in any case but within the Shrestha category which is differentiated into a number of continually shifting caste levels;
3. because the amount of real mobility (i.e. jumping from one group to another, already established, higher group) is exceedingly limited: this was certainly so at the time of Rosser’s research in 1956-57 and while significantly more frequent in the 1980’s, it is still very difficult to achieve (p. 73)

Quigley's disagreement with Rosser is that mobility into already established groups is not common at any level. He thinks that it is extremely difficult to cross the bridge from Jyapu to Shrestha, because everyone's identity can be rapidly checked (p. 83).

Quigley's latest essay in this sequence ("Śreṣṭhas: Heterogeneity among Hindu Patron Lineages") once again discusses the status of Shrestha by recapitulating Rosser's views (p. 82-9). For Quigley, Shrestha are endlessly fragmented and their status, both are often contested by themselves and by the others. Quoting Toffin's view (1984: 382) "the Śreṣṭhas, one of the most numerous groups in Newar society, deserve less and less to be described as a caste", Quigley even doubts if "Śreṣṭhas have ever been a single caste in the way that castes are normally thought to be—i.e. with a relatively homogeneous status." (p. 80) He re-examines the various levels of Shrestha presented by Rosser with his own observation and shows that Chipi Shrestha, Bāgaḥ Shrestha, Lawat Shrestha, Dhulikhel Shrestha, Thimi Shrestha and Tokha Shrestha are used, but with a pejorative sense only. The distinction between Chathare and Pāṃcathare, on the other hand, is found very widely. From his survey of a hundred Shrestha households in Kathmandu, Quigley affirms that those who are able to trace their aristocratic descents' claim of being Chathare are not controversial, but if someone claims to be Chathare and if he is not clear about his past, then he is not to be trusted. At the same time, he makes it clear that the categories *chathariya* and *pancathariya* are shifting rather than fixed. He says: "A family generally regarded as *pāncathariya* in one generation may, through skill or good fortune, be able to arrange a marriage alliance with a family generally regarded as *chathariya* and so itself effect a claim to sharing in this status." (1995: 88).

Quigley's study in Dhulikhel shows that differentiation in grades among the Shrestha is not to be found there. Through their *sīguthi* and *dyah puja guthi* Shrestha are considered to be of same status. He thinks this is characteristic to Dhulikhel and rightly noticed that the Shrestha of Dhulikhel are not accepted for marriage alliance by the Shrestha of other Newar settlements. They have to marry within their own circle, i.e. Dhulikhel Shrestha. With this regard, it is interesting to note the case of a Dhulikhel Shrestha, who has been living in the Netherlands but went back to Nepal to get his marriage arranged, and found a partner from Sikkim but a daughter of a person migrated from Dhulikhel.

A view from a Shrestha and concluding remarks

Thus, scholars have been facing difficulties in defining castes among the Newars because of intercaste mobility. Generally in a caste society,

claiming for higher a position is usual. In this regard, Newar society is a good example. For example, the Nāy or Newar butchers, who are considered to be an unclean caste, do always recall their mythical past to link themselves to royalty. Similarly, the Dyoḷā believe that they are the descendants of the Kirata kings. Therefore, within the complicated hierarchies of Newar caste system, positioning of each group at a fixed place is an extremely difficult task. At the top level, both the Brahmin priests and the Vajracarya priests are found, but Hindu Brahmin priests often claim a higher status than their Buddhist counterparts, whereas Buddhist Vajracarya do not fail to claim other way round. Similarly, each caste may be claiming higher a position than what other might do. The lowest considered caste, the Dyoḷā, also find their subordinates in Cyāme and Hālahulu.

In such a society, it is likely that status of every caste may be contested rather than accepted. Early researchers such as Fūrer-Haimendorf and Rosser might have faced the situation confusing because of this reason. On top of that, when one hears about so many grades within a single caste such as the Shrestha, and notices the possibility of upward mobility from Jyapu to Shrestha, then one might get confused. Studying Rosser's views on the status of the Shrestha, Quigley might have felt lost, which instigated him to carry out his own research. His studies made far clearer the position of the Shrestha than ever before. As it has become clear to us, contesting hierarchies among the Shrestha is not much of doubt but the perception of upwardly movement of Jyapu to Shrestha, which is non-existing, at least in traditional Newar settlements in the Valley, does not correspond to real practice. In fact, Rosser also admits that once a person's caste name is known, his identity cannot be hidden any longer. However, his assumption of caste mobility is not simple to be understood, because as Quigley noted, in the Kathmandu Valley, a person's identity can easily be verified. Certainly, there are examples of shifting identity to Shrestha by other Newar castes when they move to far away places such as to eastern or far western Nepal or to India but within the Newar settlements of the Kathmandu Valley, it is not simple.

From my own research in Sankhu, it can be said that in a small Newar settlement, upward movement from Jyapu to Shrestha is not achievable. Even the offspring of those Shrestha who married lower castes never attains his or her father's status, although they may be carrying their father's surname. Practically no transgression of caste is possible. People still talk about Chathare and Pāṃcathare divisions among the Shrestha, but the hierarchical distinction between these two categories, which was a reality until two or three decades ago, has been lost. It is interesting to note that among the Shrestha, to claim oneself Chathare Shrestha (the

highest status) and to point out others as Pāṃcathare Shrestha (lower) was very common, especially when marriages were arranged. Once the marriage was settled, such claims calmed down. In many cases, it happens that those claiming to be Chathare would find their affine among the Pāṃcathare Shresthas.

In the past, many stories were heard in Sankhu that once such and such a Chathare family's daughter was married to a low graded Shrestha and that she was denied access to the kitchen of her own parental home, or the other way that she was denied access to her husband's kitchen. Today, this kind of stories is not heard anymore. Some of the Shrestha in Sankhu have marriage relations with Shrestha of Dhulikhel, Dolkha, Tauthali, Tokha and Thimi but in general, such relations are still prohibited, because the Shrestha of these settlements are considered low graded. In Sankhu, there are no Chipi Shrestha, Lawat Shrestha, Bāgaḥ or half Shrestha or any Jyapu claiming to be Shrestha, but in Bhaktapur and in Kathmandu, people still talk about these distinctions. Especially, Bhaktapur is still known for caste conservatism.

Sīguthi membership can be considered as one of the criteria to distinguish status differences between the Shrestha. In fact, this was true in the past when denying membership to a suspected lower status Shrestha in so called high graded Shrestha's *sīguthi* used to be common. However, nowadays all the existing Shrestha *sīguthi* in Sankhu are flexible enough to accept members from other *sīguthi*. During my research, I recorded 27 *sīguthi* belonging to Shrestha in Sankhu. Usually, each son who begins his separate kitchen must obtain his own membership to a *sīguthi* and selects the *sīguthi* of his choice.

In practice, there is no barrier left among the Shrestha as far as marriage or commensality is concerned. In Sankhu, Maske, Rajbhandari and Pradhan share *sīguthi* membership with the Shrestha. Joshi also share their *sīguthi* memberships with the Shrestha and intermarry with them. They serve as assistant priests together with the Rajopadhyay priests in performing domestic rituals, but the Joshi are considered to be equal to the Shrestha in caste rank.

From my study in Sankhu, it can be concluded that status differences among the Shrestha are no longer found, but in other settlements the same may not be the case. Especially in places such as Bhaktapur, where conservative notions are still prevalent, differences of status among the Shrestha are still recorded. On the other hand, the status gap between Shrestha and Jyapu is still evident in all the Newar settlements. It can be said that change of one's caste from Jyapu to Shrestha will not be accepted for years to come.

My study in Sankhu shows that traditional hierarchies of castes have lost their importance after the implementation of the 1964 new legal code in Nepal, but people are still maintaining them until today. Although a few strict conservative notions of castes have disappeared, their hierarchy is still prevalent and stigmatisation of low castes is still a fact. It may take years before the notion of high and low castes among the Newars disappear, especially in the traditional Newar settlements.

The most recent trend that appeared in the Newar society is the establishment of caste based organisations. In Kathmandu, the Vajracarya (the Buddhist priestly caste), Uray (the Merchant castes like Tuladhar and Kansakar), Citrakar (painters), Mali (gardener), Manandhar (oil pressers), Kapali (Tailor and Musicians), Khadgi (Butchers), Poda (Sweepers), Tandukar and Jyapu (farmers) have had their caste foundations for many years. However, the Shrestha did not feel necessary to have their caste organisation. It was only in 2004 that they initiated a *Syasyā Samaj* or the Association of the Shrestha in Kathmandu in a bid to unite all the Shrestha of Nepal. It is expected that the Shrestha caste association would be the most influential one because of their affluent position, and as a high caste but accommodating all those who claim themselves Shrestha (K. Sakya 2004). There are also a number of organisations that were created to unite all the Newars to achieve rights to the Newar nationality. All these Newar national organisations, such as the National Forum of the Newars (*Newa De Dabu*) or the Association of Newar Speakers (*Nepalbhāṣā Maṅkāh Khalah*) talk about the abolition of caste hierarchies and caste discriminations in Newar society. They accommodate members in their organisations without caste bias. In 2005, when its fourth convention took place, eighteen Newar caste organisations appeared to have affiliated themselves with the National Forum of the Newars. The National Forum of the Newars has been working with these caste groups to produce profile of each caste. It presents the Newars as a single nationality and pleads for helping role from all the Newar castes in its bid to achieve equal rights from the State. However, in most Newar festivals and ritual each caste has to fulfil its own duties. Therefore, eliminating traditional notions of castes differences will not be an easy task to the Newars for years to come.

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