Cultural Dance

Living Goddess Kumari

Gurung Caste of Nepal

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Culture: Introduction

Culture is one of the important concepts in sociology. No human society can exist and develop without its culture. The main difference between the animal and human societies is of culture only. Animal societies have no culture because they do not have systems of learning and transmitting social experiences. Sociologists are keenly interested in the study of culture because the study of human society is incomplete without it.

According to Edward Taylor culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society.

In Dressler’s perspective Culture is a social heritage, transmitted from one generation to another. It consists of the sum total of skill, beliefs, knowledge and products that are commonly shared by a number of people and transmitted to their children.

Definition of culture

Different sociologists have differently defined the term culture:

Taylor: “Culture is the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and habits and any capabilities acquired by man as a member of society”.

Linton: “Culture is social heredity, which is transmitted from one generation to another with the accumulation of individual experiences”.

Specific Objectives

After the completion of this lecture student will be able to
- Share the meaning and definition culture
- Explain the characteristics and functions of culture
- Describe cultural contents and elements
- Explain about the Nepalese culture linking with business management
John Beattee: Culture is the way of life which is transmitted from generation to generation”.

**Characteristics of Culture**

From the definitions it becomes clear that sociologically culture has specific meaning and characteristics. It is the product of human behavior and gaining knowledge through group. It is a system of learned behavior and set procedure. Some of the salient characteristics of culture are as under:

- Culture is learned.
- Culture is shared.
- Culture is transmitted.
- Culture is changing.

1. **Culture is learned:**
   
   Most of the behavior is learned in society. This learning might be conscious or unconscious but nobody can deny the process of learning. Culture is something learnt and acquired e.g. wearing clothes or dancing. It is not something natural to the person.

2. **Culture is transmitted**
   
   All the culture traits and objects are transmitted among the members of society continually. Most of the cultural traits and material objects are transmitted to the members of the society from their forefathers. We learn new fashion, how to move in society and how to behave in a particular social situation.

3. **Culture is shared:**
   
   All the traits, attitudes, ideas, knowledge and material objects like radio, television and automobiles etc. is actually shared by members of society

4. **Culture is changing**
   
   Culture never remains static but changing. It is changing in every society, but with different speed and causes. It constantly undergoes change and adapts itself to the environments. Cultural Change may result from internal dynamics or by outside forces. The speed in which cultures change may vary much through outside forces.
**Functions of Culture**

Culture makes communication possible by means of a language. Culture provides standards for differentiating right and wrong. It provides the knowledge and skills needed for survival. It helps people identify with others and make them feel a sense of belonging. Some specific functions of culture are described below:

1. **Culture is the treasury of knowledge**

For the physical, social and the intellectual existence culture provides knowledge. Human being can modify their environment according to their need but animal cannot. It is due to their culture.

2. **Culture defines situations**

What we eat and drink, what we wear, when to laugh, weep, sleep, love, what work we do etc are depends on culture.

3. **Culture defines attitude, values and goals**

Attitude refers to the tendency to feel and act in certain ways, values are the measure of goodness or desirability and goals refer to attainments which our values define as worthy. These phenomenons are influenced by our culture.

4. **Culture decides our career**

Culture sets limitation on our choice to select different career. Eg. Whether we should become a politician, a social worker, a doctor, an engineer, a solder, a farmer or a professor and so on is decided by our culture.

5. **Culture provides behavior patterns**

Culture directs and confines the behavior of an individual. Culture assigns goals and provides means for achieving them.

6. **Culture molds personality**

No child develops human quality in the absence of cultural environment. Culture prepares human for group life and provides him/her to design of living. The impact of culture on the individual is not always identical in every case. Various biological and social factors bring about the uniqueness of the individual in any culture.

7. **Culture decides our career**

Culture sets limitation on our choice to select different carrier. Eg. Whether we should become a politician, a social worker, a doctor, an engineer, a solder, a farmer or a professor and so on is decided by our culture.
8. **Culture provides behavior patterns**

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**Cultural Contents**

There are major two kinds of cultural contents which are described below:

1. **Material Culture**

From material culture we understand material and physical objects. For instance, house, road, vehicles, pen, table, radio set, book etc. these are the products of human efforts to control his environment and make his life conformable and safe. More specifically **Material culture** refers to the physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture. These include homes, neighborhoods, cities, schools, churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, offices, factories and plants, tools, means of production, goods and products, stores, and so forth. All of these physical aspects of a culture help to define its members' behaviors and perceptions.

2. **Non-material culture**

It refers to the nonphysical ideas that people have about their culture, including beliefs, values, rules, norms, morals, language, organizations, and institutions. For instance, the non-material cultural concept of *religion* consists of a set of ideas and beliefs about God, worship, morals, and ethics. These beliefs, then, determine how the culture responds to its religious topics, issues, and events.

When considering non-material culture, sociologists refer to several processes that a culture uses to shape its members' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Four of the most important of these are symbols, language, values, and norms. It is very important in determining human behavior and has strong hold on an individual.

Both parts are inter-related with each other.
Elements of Culture

The elements of culture include Norms, Values, Beliefs, Knowledge, and Technology. Signs/symbols etc.

Norms

These are the guidelines people are supposed to follow in their relation with one another. They indicate what people should or should not do in specific situations. They indicate the standard of morality, legality, and ethics of a society that are covered by sanctions (permit or allow) when violation are made.

Types of Social Norms

a. Folkways – folkways are the general standards of behaviour adhered by a group. These are the ordinary customs of different group cultures. Example: wearing pants and not skirts, ways of people greet each other, design and decoration of the homes, varieties of food preparation etc.

b. Mores – Mores are the stricter norms than folkways. These are the norms people consider vital to their wellbeing and most special values; they are special customs with moral and ethical significance, which are strongly held and emphasized. Mores are often upheld through rule or laws, the written set of guidelines that define right and wrong in society. In some culture the rules of dress are strongly interpreted such as Islamic culture.

c. Laws – these are formalized norms enacted by people vested with legitimate authority.

Values

Values are abstract concepts of what is important and worthwhile; they are general ideas that individuals share about what is good or bad, beautiful and ugly etc. Values can provide rules for behaviour, but can also be the source of conflict.

Beliefs

Beliefs refer to a person's conviction (confidence) about a certain idea. Beliefs are shared ideas people hold collectively within a given culture and these beliefs are also the basis for many of cultures' norms and values, Eg beliefs in god.

Signs / Symbols

Signs indicate singles and symbols. It refers to an object, gesture, sound, colour or design that represents something “other than itself”. Signals and symbols are slightly different. A play card bearing the words “No Parking” is a signal. It indicates the presence of place where on is not supposed to park one’s vehicles. But the words in the placard represent the symbols. Like a signal, a symbol means something to the interpreting. A signal involved three term relationship
(interpreting, signal and object) while a symbol is involved in a four term relationship
(interpreting, symbol, concept and object).

Language is the important symbols of any societies. Language is the cornerstone of culture. All
cultures have a spoken language (even if there are no developed forms of writing). People who
speak the same language often share the same culture. Many societies include a large number of
people who speak different languages. Each language can have several different dialects.

Religion

Religion answers basic questions about the meaning of life. Supports values that groups of
people feel are important. Religion is often a source of conflict between cultures. Monotheism is
a belief in one god. Polytheism is a belief in many gods and atheism is a belief in no gods.

Knowledge and Technology

Cultures of all societies whether illiterate and literate include a vast amount of knowledge and
technology about the physical and social world. The position of knowledge is known as
cognition elements. The member of each society must know about many things in order to
survive. In modern advanced societies knowledge and technology is so vast, deep and complex
that no single person can hope the master the whole of it.

Nepal – Cultural Scenario

Ethnic Groups

Nepalese society was ethnically diverse and complex in the early 1990s, ranging in phenotype
(physical characteristics) and culture from the Indian to the Tibetan. Except for the sizable
population of those of Indian birth or ancestry concentrated in the Tarai bordering India, the
varied ethnic groups had evolved into distinct patterns over time.

Political scientists Joshi and Rose broadly classify the Nepalese population into three major
ethnic groups in terms of their origin: Indo-Nepalese, Tibeto-Nepalese, and indigenous Nepalese.
In the case of the first two groups, the direction if their migration and Nepal's landscapes
appeared to have led to their vertical distribution; most ethnic groups were found at particular
altitudes. The first group, comprising those of Indo- Nepalese origin, inhabited the more fertile
lower hills, river valleys, and Tarai plains. The second major group consisted of communities of
Tibeto-Mongol origin occupying the higher hills from the west to the east. The third and much
smaller group comprised a number of tribal communities, such as the Tharus and the Dhimals of
the Tarai; they may be remnants of indigenous communities whose habitation predates the
advent of Indo-Nepalese and Tibeto-Mongol elements.

Even though Indo-Nepalese migrants were latecomers to Nepal relative to the migrants from the
north, they have come to dominate the country not only numerically, but also socially,
politically, and economically. They managed to achieve early dominance over the native and
northern migrant populations, largely because of the superior formal educational and
technological systems they brought with them. Consequently, their overall domination has had tremendous significance in terms of ethnic power structure.

Within the Indo-Nepalese group, at least two distinct categories can be discerned. The first category includes those who fled India and moved to the safe sanctuaries of the Nepal hills several hundred years ago, in the wake of the Muslim invasions of northern India. The hill group of Indian origin primarily was composed of descendants of high-caste Hindu families. According to Joshi and Rose, "These families, mostly of Brahman and Kshatriya status, have spread through the whole of Nepal with the exception of the areas immediately adjacent to the northern border. They usually constitute a significant portion of the local elites and are frequently the largest landowners in an area." This segment of the Indo-Nepalese population, at the apex of which stands the nation's royal family, has played the most dominant role in the country. Other ethnic groups, including those of Indian origin that settled in the Tarai, have been peripheral to the political power structure.

The second group of Indo-Nepalese migrants includes the inhabitants of the Tarai. Many of them are relatively recent migrants, who were encouraged by the government of Nepal or its agents to move into the Tarai for settlement during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the early 1990s, this group mostly consisted of landless tenants and peasants from northern India's border states of Bihar and Bengal. Some of these Indian migrants later became large landowners.

The north Indian antecedents of a number of caste groups in the hills (that is, the first group of Indo-Nepalese migrants), which, in the early 1990s, made up more than 50 percent of the total population, are evident in their language, religion, social organization, and physical appearance. All of these features, however, have been modified in the Nepalese environment. These groups--several castes of Brahmans, the high-ranking Thakuri and Chhetri (the Nepalese derivative of the Kshatriya) castes, and an untouchable category--generally are classified as Pahari, or Parbate. However, in most parts of Nepal (except in the Tarai), the term pahari has only a limited use in that the Paharis generally are known by their individual caste names.

Nepali, the native tongue of the Paharis and the national language of Nepal, is closely related to, but by no means identical with, Hindi. Both are rooted in Sanskrit. The Hinduism of the Pahari has been influenced by Buddhism and indigenous folk belief. The Paharis' caste system was neither as elaborately graded nor as all embracing in its sanctions as that of the Indians; physically, many of the Paharis showed the results of racial intermixture with the various Mongoloid groups of the region. Similarly, the Bhothe or Bhotia groups inhabiting the foothills of the Himalayas--among whom the Sherpas have attracted the most attention in the mountaineering world--have developed regional distinctions among themselves, although clearly related physically as well as culturally to the Tibetans. The term Bhothe literally means inhabitant of Bhot, a Sanskrit term for the trans-Himalayan region of Nepal, or the Tibetan region. However, Bhothe is also a generic term, often applied to people of Tibetan culture or Mongoloid phenotype. As used by the Paharis and the Newars, it often had a pejorative connotation and could be applied to any non-Hindu of Mongoloid appearance.

An extraordinarily complex terrain also affected the geographic distribution and interaction among various ethnic groups. Within the general latitudinal sorting of Indo-Nepalese (lower
hills) and Tibeto-Nepalese (higher hills and mountains) groups, there was a lateral (longitudinal) pattern, in which various ethnic populations were concentrated in specific geographic pockets. The deeply cut valleys and high ridges tended to divide ethnic groups into many small, relatively isolated, and more or less self-contained communities. This pattern was especially prominent among the Tibeto-Nepalese population. For example, the Bhote group was found in the far north, trans-Himalayan section of the Mountain Region, close to the Tibetan border. The Sherpas, a subgroup within the Bhote, were concentrated in the northeast, around the Mount Everest area. To the south of their areas were other Tibeto-Nepalese ethnic groups—the Gurung in the west-central hills and the Tamang and Rai in the east-central hills—particularly close to and east of the Kathmandu Valley. The Magar group, found largely in the central hills, was much more widely distributed than the Gurung, Tamang, and Rai. In the areas occupied by the Limbu and Rai peoples, the Limbu domain was located farther east in the hills, just beyond the Rai zone. The Tharu group was found in the Tarai, and the Paharis were scattered throughout Nepal. Newars largely were concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley. However, because of their past migration as traders and merchants, they also were found in virtually all the market centers, especially in the hills, and as far away as Lhasa in Tibet.

This geographically concentrated ethnic distribution pattern generally remained in effect in the early 1990s, despite a trend toward increasing spatial mobility and relocating ethnic populations. For example, a large number of Bhotes (also called Mananges from the Manang District) in the central section of the Mountain Region, Tamangs, and Sherpas have moved to the Kathmandu Valley. Similarly, Thakalis from the Mustang District adjacent to Manang have moved to Pokhara, a major urban center in the hills about 160 kilometers west of Kathmandu, and to Butawal and Siddhartha Nagar, two important urban areas in the central part of the Tarai, directly south of Pokhara. Gurungs, Magars, and Rais also have become increasingly dispersed.

Most of the Indo-Nepalese peoples—both Paharis and Tarai dwellers (commonly known among the Paharis as madhesis, meaning midlanders)—were primarily agriculturalists, although a majority of them also relied on other activities to produce supplementary income. They generally raised some farm animals, particularly water buffalo, cows, goats, and sheep, for domestic purposes. The Paharis traditionally have occupied the vast majority of civil service positions. As a result, they have managed to dominate and to control Nepal’s bureaucracy to their advantage. It was not until the 1980s that a prime minister came from the non-Pahari segment of the population. Despite some loosening of the total Pahari domination of the bureaucracy in recent years, a 1991 newspaper report, summarized in the Nepal Press Digest, revealed that 80 percent of the posts in the civil service, the army, and the police still were held by the Brahmans and Chhetris of the hills, who comprised less than 50 percent of the population; 13 percent were held by Kathmandu Valley Newars, whose share of the total population was merely 3 percent. The report added that even in 1991, the eleven-member Council of Ministers in 1991 had six Brahmans and three Newars. Furthermore, six of the nine-member Constitution Recommendation Commission, which drafted the new constitution in 1990, were hill Brahmans. In spite of the increasing number of Newars holding government jobs, they traditionally were recognized as a commercial merchant and handicraft class. It was no exaggeration that they historically have been the prime agents of Nepalese culture and art. A significant number of them also were engaged in farming. In that sense, they can be described as agro-commercialists.
Most of the Tibeto-Nepalese groups traditionally could be considered agro-pastoralists. Because their physical environment offered only limited land and agricultural possibilities, the Tibeto-Nepalese groups who occupied the high mountainous areas, such as the Bhoté and particularly the Sherpa, were almost forced to rely more on herding and pastoral activities than on crop farming. They also participated in seasonal trading activity to supplement their income and food supply. However, those peoples inhabiting the medium and low hills south of the high mountains—particularly the Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Rai, and Limbu groups—depended on farming and herding in relatively equal amounts because their environment was relatively more suitable for agriculture. Among these groups, the Gurung, Magar, and Rai historically have supplied the bulk of the famous Gurkha contingents to the British and Indian armies, although their ranks have been augmented from the Thakuri and Chhetri castes of the Indo-Nepalese Paharis. The term *Gurkha* was derived from the name of the former principality of Gorkha, about seventy kilometers west of Kathmandu, and was not an ethnic designation.

**The Caste System**

One integral aspect of Nepalese society is the existence of the Hindu caste system, modeled after the ancient and orthodox Brahmanic system of the Indian plains. The caste system did not exist prior to the arrival of Indo-Aryans. Its establishment became the basis of the emergence of the feudalistic economic structure of Nepal: the high-caste Hindus began to appropriate lands—particularly lowlands that were more easily accessible, more cultivatable, and more productive—including those belonging to the existing tribal people, and introduced the system of individual ownership. Even though the cultural and religious rigidity of the caste system slowly has been eroding, its introduction into Nepal was one of the most significant influences stemming from the migration of the Indo-Aryan people into the hills. The migrants from the north later were incorporated into the Hindu caste system, as defined by Indo-Aryan migrants, who quickly controlled the positions of power and authority. Tibetan migrants did not practice private ownership; their system was based on communal ownership.

No single, widely acceptable definition can be advanced for the caste system. Bishop and others, however, view caste as a multifaceted status hierarchy composed of all members of society, with each individual ranked within the broad, fourfold Hindu class (*varna*, or color) divisions, or within the fifth class of untouchables—outcastes and the socially polluted. The fourfold caste divisions are Brahman (priests and scholars), Kshatriya or Chhetri (rulers and warriors), Vaisya (or Vaisaya, merchants and traders), and Sudra (farmers, artisans, and laborers). These Pahari caste divisions based on the Hindu system are not strictly upheld by the Newars. They have their own caste hierarchy, which, they claim, is parallel in caste divisions to the Pahari Hindu system. In each system, each caste (*jati*) is ideally an endogamous group in which membership is both hereditary and permanent. The only way to change caste status is to undergo Sanskritization. Sanskritization can be achieved by migrating to a new area and by changing one's caste status and/or marrying across the caste line, which can lead to the upgrading or downgrading of caste, depending on the spouse's caste. However, given the rigidity of the caste system, intercaste marriage carries a social stigma, especially when it takes place between two castes at the extreme ends of the social spectrum.
As Bishop further asserts, at the core of the caste structure is a rank order of values bound up in concepts of ritual status, purity, and pollution. Furthermore, caste determines an individual's behavior, obligations, and expectations. All the social, economic, religious, legal, and political activities of a caste society are prescribed by sanctions that determine and limit access to land, position of political power, and command of human labor. Within such a constrictive system, wealth, political power, high rank, and privilege converge; hereditary occupational specialization is a common feature. Nevertheless, caste is functionally significant only when viewed in a regional or local context and at a particular time. The assumed correlation between the caste hierarchy and the socioeconomic class hierarchy does not always hold. Because of numerous institutional changes over the years and increased dilution (or expansion) of the caste hierarchy stemming from intercaste marriages, many poor high-caste and rich low-caste households could be found in the society in 1991.

Although Paharis, especially those in rural areas, were generally quite conscious of their caste status, the question of caste did not usually arise for Tibeto-Nepalese communities unless they were aware of the Hindu caste status arbitrarily assigned to them. Insofar as they accepted caste-based notions of social rank, the Tibeto-Nepalese tended not only to see themselves at a higher level than did the Hindu Pahari and Newar, but also differed as to ranking among themselves. Thus, it was doubtful that the reported Rai caste's assumption of rank superiority over the Magar and Gurung castes was accepted by the two latter groups. Moreover, the status of a particular group was apt to vary from place to place, depending on its relative demographic size, wealth, and local power.

Language

Even though Nepali (written in Devanagari script, the same as Sanskrit and Hindi) was the national language and was mentioned as the mother tongue by approximately 58 percent of the population, there were several other languages and dialects. Other languages included Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang, Newari, and Abadhi. Non-Nepali languages and dialects rarely were spoken outside their ethnic enclaves. In order to estimate the numerical distribution of different ethnic groups, the census data indicating various mother tongues spoken in the country must be used.

In terms of linguistic roots, Nepali, Maithili, and Bhojpuri belonged to the Indo-European family; the mother tongues of the Tibeto-Nepalese groups, including Newari, belonged predominantly to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Pahari, whose mother tongue was Nepali, was the largest ethnic group. If the Maithili- and Bhojpuri-speaking populations of the Tarai were included, more than 75 percent of the population belonged to the Indo-Nepalese ethnic group. Only three other ethnic groups—the Tamang, the Tharu, and the Newar—approached or slightly exceeded the one-half million population mark. Most of those non-Nepali linguistic and ethnic population groups were closely knit by bonds of nationalism and cultural harmony, and they were concentrated in certain areas.
Social System and Values

In the mid-twentieth century, Nepal remained gripped in a feudalistic socioeconomic structure despite the influence of Western popular culture, growing commercialization, and some penetration of capitalism. The first challenge to this feudalistic power structure came in 1950-51, when the Rana autocracy was overthrown by the popular democratic movement that restored the authority of the monarchy.

There was no popularly elected government until 1959. During his reign, King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev frequently changed the government, pitting one ruling clan against another in a manner clearly reminiscent of Shah Politics prior to the rise of Rana rule. He also reconstituted the system of palace patronage, replacing the system of Rana patronage. The Ranas, however, firmly controlled the armed forces.

In December 1960, King Mahendra launched a palace coup against the popularly elected government of Prime Minister Bishweshwar Prasad (B.P.) Koirala and reestablished his absolute monarchical rule under the banner of the partyless panchayat system. Until early 1990, the panchayat system, strictly controlled by the palace, remained firmly in place. The transition to a new social order was stymied; society remained entrenched in a feudalistic structure.

There was, however, a tide of Western popular culture and commercialization sweeping over Nepal. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Westerners, so-called hippies, were attracted to Nepal, looking for inexpensive marijuana and hashish. Nepal suddenly emerged as a "hippie Shangri-la." There were no laws or legal restrictions on the sale and purchase of such drugs, and they could be used openly. In fact, some Westerners thought the Nepalese were generally happy and content because they were always high. Although this view was a distortion, nonetheless it was very common to see elderly Nepalese men smoking marijuana, invariably mixed with tobacco, in public. Marijuana plants grew almost everywhere; sometimes they were found growing even along main streets. Locally produced hashish also was widely consumed, particularly during festivals celebrated by some ethnic groups and tribes. It was, however, very unusual for a Nepalese to develop a marijuana or hashish habit until reaching about forty years of age.

By the late 1980s, the situation had changed dramatically. There was an emerging drug subculture in the urban areas, and a number of youths, including college and high school students, sold and consumed drugs. Many of these youths had gone beyond using marijuana and hashish to more potent drugs, such as "crack" and cocaine—drugs unheard of in the past. In the 1960s, Westerners had sought release from the overbearing materialism of developed countries; they copied the Nepalese (and other Easterners) who smoked marijuana and hashish. Ironically, in the 1980s and 1990s, it was Nepalese youths who were enchanted by the North American material and drug culture. There were an estimated 20,000 heroin addicts in 1989. In response to the drug situation in the country, in the late 1980s the government initiated antinarcotics measures and narcotics training, and King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev directed extensive media attention to narcotics abuse. The effectiveness of the battle against narcotics, however, was limited by the lack of an official government body to target drug abuse.
Rural Society and Kinship

Nepal in the early 1990s was predominantly a rural-agricultural society, where more than 90 percent of the people lived in rural areas and depended on farming as a source of livelihood. Even in settlements designated as urban areas, the rural-urban distinction easily was blurred; approximately 50 percent of urbanites outside the three cities in the Kathmandu Valley were engaged in farming for their livelihood. Even in the Kathmandu Valley cities, 30 to 40 percent of city dwellers were agriculturalists. In this sense, most urban areas were economic extensions of rural areas, but with an urban manifestation and a commercial component. Farming was the dominant order of society and the mainstay of the economy, a situation that was unlikely to change, given the extremely sluggish pace of economic transformation.

The basic social unit in a village was the family, or paribar, consisting of a patrilineally extended household. The extended family system should not, however, be construed as a necessarily harmonious form of village life. Many extended families broke apart as sons separated from parents and brothers from each other. At the time of separation, the family property was equally divided among the sons. If parents were alive, they each received a share. Family separation generally occurred in cases where the head of the household was less assertive and domineering, when the father died, or when all the sons married. Unmarried sons normally did not separate from their parents; if the parents were deceased, unmarried sons usually stayed with their older brothers. Because family separation always resulted in a division of family landholdings, landholdings were extremely fragmented, both geographically and socially. Sometimes, family separation and resulting land fragmentation turned into a bitter feud and led to legal disputes.

Beyond the immediate family, there existed a larger kinship network that occasionally involved sharing food. This network also was an important means of meeting farm labor needs, especially during the planting and harvesting seasons, when labor shortages were common.

Above the kinship network was the village, which functioned as a broader unit of social existence. Some villages were no more than hamlets made up of just a few houses; others were sizable communities of several neighboring hamlets. In more populous villages, the caste groups contained occupational low (untouchable) caste groups, such as the Kami (ironsmiths who make tools), the Sarki (leathersmiths), and the Damai (tailors and musicians), who fulfilled the vital basic needs of the village as a fairly self-contained production unit.

Villagers occasionally pooled their resources and labored together to implement village-level projects, such as building irrigation ditches or channels, or facilities for drinking water. If a household could afford to hire farm labor, it usually relied on the mutual labor-sharing system called parma, which allowed villagers to exchange labor for labor at times of need.

Although farming traditionally ranked among the most desirable occupations, villagers frequently encouraged some of their children to leave in search of civil service, army, and other employment opportunities. Individual migration was often the result of a family decision and an important economic strategy; it not only served as a safety valve for growing population pressures but also generated cash incomes, thereby averting any undue economic crises in the family. Well-to-do village families usually pushed their children to obtain civil service jobs as a
means of climbing the bureaucratic ladder and of developing valuable connections with the elite political structure.

Farming was the most important source of livelihood in rural areas, but the scarcity of land placed severe constraints on agricultural development. Landholding was the most important basis for, or criterion of, socioeconomic stratification. The 1981 agricultural census data identifies five classes of peasantry: landless and nearly landless, people with no land or less than half a hectare; subsistence, those with half a hectare to one hectare; small, holders of one to three hectares; medium, people with three to five hectares; and large, farmers of more than five hectares.

In terms of production relations, the first two classes were dependent on large landowners for survival. Small landowners, on the other hand, were relatively independent; they did not have to depend on the large landowning class for survival, especially if they were involved in circular migration as a source of supplementary cash income. Nor did they regularly employ members of the first two classes. Landowners of medium-sized plots were independent of large landowners. Their engagement in wage laboring or tenancy farming was sporadic, if present at all. In some cases, they employed others during peak farming seasons. The large landowning class regularly employed farm workers and benefited from the existence of excess labor, which kept wages low. In general, the situation of landholders was exacerbated by the archaic nature of farming technology and the absence of other resources. It was not surprising that rural poverty was widespread.

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