

## Brahmins (Brāhmaṇas) in Nepal and India (4th To 8th Century A.D.): Fragments of Information Gleaned from Inscriptions

**Dr. Arpita Tripathy**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sanskrit, DTSKSM,  
Debra, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal  
Pin-721124, ph. No. 8927589032,  
[arpitaxy@gmail.com](mailto:arpitaxy@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The Licchavis ruled the Nepal Valley from 4<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. At that time according to the Hindu rule of social stratification, the people of Nepal are divided into four main categories – the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Khṣatriyas*, the *Vaiśyas* and the *Śudras*. The first two are supposed to perform the duties of the priests and protects respectively. The *Vaiśyas* are supposed to handle the trade and business affairs. The remaining group is to provide manual services to the higher one. The Inscription on the pedestal of Chaṇḍeśvara dated 640 A.D.<sup>1</sup> from Nepal contains two lines where the expression *varṇāśramodbhāsita* (line 1) occurs. In this paper an attempt has been made to show the position and status of the *Brāhmaṇas* of ancient Nepal and as well as in ancient India.

The rules prescribed by Manu, Yajnavalkya, Brihaspati, Narada are followed in Indian and Nepal society. But some differences are observed from the inscriptional evidences. There were no hard and fast rules for *Brāhmaṇas* in ancient Nepal society. *Brāhmaṇas* were dignified and important in the Nepal administration and usually they appear as priests, local administrators and animal raisers also. From the context of the Bungmati Inscription from Nepal it can be assumed that *Brāhmaṇas* and others are raising animals like pigs, fowls, etc with the full support of royal administration and the *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* is strictly prohibited to enter in to the village. Manu, Yajnavalkya prescribed some *āpaddharmavṛtti* (professions can be taken at the time of danger) for *Brāhmaṇas* but animals such as pigs, fowls rearing are strictly forbidden for them and no such evidences are found in the inscriptions from India where *Brāhmaṇas* are rearing animals with śudras.

**Keywords:** *Brāhmaṇas*, Inscription, *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa*, Nepal, India.

In Nepal *Brāhmaṇas* were in a high position from 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. The very first inscription<sup>2</sup> of Manadeva I (464A.D.) talks of *Brāhmaṇas* to have received beautiful gifts at the hands of the queen mother and the king. In the Chāṅgu Pillar Inscription dated 464 A.D. (I) Dharmadeva used to make sacrificial offerings by pure animals (may be *aśvamedhayajña*). His wife Rājyavatī was engaged in a ritual to feed the gods with the help of *Brāhmaṇas* as the news of the death of her husband was broken to her suddenly. In the funeral of her husband she distributed her fortune to *Brāhmaṇas*. After returning from war Mānadeva I also gave *Brāhmaṇas* his inexhaustible riches. At the time of Mānadeva I *Brāhmaṇas* were highly praised but it seems that they did not get the position of the counsellors as there are no such inscriptional evidences at that time. They did sacrificial performances and got wealth as donations.

But at the time of Vasantadeva they were started to be addressed in charters-*grāme nivāsoḥpatān brāhmaṇapurassarān* (line 5-6)<sup>3</sup>. The *Brāhmaṇas* became a part of royal authority and probably salary holders from the time of Vasantadeva. Several inscriptions issued by Licchavi rulers of the Pre-Aṃśuvarman period, as well as those by the later kings of the same dynasty addressed the villagers and inhabitants as those led by *Brāhmaṇas* (*Brāhmaṇapurassarān*). It is said that “This is probably a pointer to the fact that caste system was in vogue at that time in Nepal and in the hierarchy the *Brāhmaṇas* occupied the first and most supreme position.”<sup>4</sup>

The term *Pāñcālī* appeared in Buddhanilakantha Inscription dated 596 A.D.,<sup>5</sup> is a local administrative body composed of five members. May be some members of *Pāñcālī* are *Brāhmaṇas* because generally *Pāñcālī* was the committee to look after the administration of the temple and its properties included the lands belonging to the temple. The Sonaguthi Inscription of Śivadeva II<sup>6</sup> dated 701 A.D. mentions *Brāhmaṇapurassarān ca pāñcālīkānām*, clarifies that *Pāñcālīka* was a body composed of heterogeneous class groups. The *Brāhmaṇas* occupying a prominent position there in.<sup>7</sup>

In the Bungmati Inscription<sup>8</sup> of Amśuvarmā dated 605 A.D. Yangāhiṭi Inscription of Bhīmārjunaḍeva<sup>9</sup> dated 630 A.D., the term *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* is mentioned. Agrawal refers that 'In Tāmilnāḍu in ancient days, the village organization consisting of Brahmins called *sabhā* was in control of the administration of a *Brahmadeyam* village including the realization of taxes in the village. In several details reflected in the Nepal inscriptions some similarity with practices and designations of Tāmilnāḍu is found'.<sup>10</sup>

According to Banerjee, the meaning of *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* "...is an office where learned brāhmaṇas were members or an office consisting of a troop of hired soldiers, which was probably in charge of the domesticated animals...."<sup>11</sup>

In Sanskrit *Bhaṭa* means a warrior and *Bhaṭṭa* means a learned man who knows Veda. So, in Nepal inscriptions *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa*, was a group of *Brāhmaṇas* possibly to observe the maintenance of the rules and regulations of *varṇāśrama*.

Although *Brāhmaṇas* had role in administration but the main role of *Brāhmaṇas* was confined in religious sector of the ancient Nepal society. Lele Inscription<sup>12</sup> of Śivadeva I dated 604 A.D. informs that the areas of the fields are allotted to the *Brāhmaṇa-goṣṭhikās* of the venerable Vāsudeva to *Simha-maṇḍapa* – 20 *mā*, again the fields are allotted to *Brāhmaṇa-goṣṭhikās* for getting 10 *mā*. There were special *Goṣṭhikās* of *Brāhmaṇas* or for the need of *Brāhmaṇas* that is – *Brāhmaṇa – sānāthya –goṣṭhikā*. Sundaram explains the term as – body of such persons who assist the *Brāhmaṇas*.<sup>13</sup> Regmi says – “The *Brāhmaṇa-goṣṭhikās* had formed their *Goṣṭhī* in order to serve their group interest.”<sup>14</sup> About *Brāhmaṇa – sānāthya –goṣṭhikā* Regmi says again “A *goṣṭhikā* which served the needy and poor was called *sānāthya*.”<sup>15</sup> The *Brāhmaṇa – sānāthya –goṣṭhikā* probably formed for the help of the poor *Brāhmaṇas*.

But about the position and professions of *Brāhmaṇas* there was no hard and fast rule in ancient Nepal society as it is observed in the ancient society of India. The Nepal society was not so much rigid about the rules and regulations related with *Brāhmaṇas*. Not only as a member of *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* or *Pāñcālī* at the same time sometimes they had to take professions of śudras like raising animals with the full support of the royal administration.

The *Brāhmaṇas* are addressed in the Ādi-Nārāyaṇa Thankot inscription of Vasantadeva dated 506 A.D. (XX) with *Aṣṭādaśaprakṛti* which is supposed to be eighteen tribal groups.<sup>16</sup> The inscription<sup>17</sup> in front of the Chāṅgu Temple of Śivadeva I addressed *Pradhānapurassarān* instead of *Brāhmaṇapurassarān*. The Viṣṇupādukā Inscription<sup>18</sup> dated 590 A.D. and the Bhimasen Inscription<sup>19</sup> dated 594 A.D. give the only term *Pradhānapurassarān* not *Brāhmaṇapurassarān*.

The extreme liberal outlook of Nepal kings is reflected in the Bungmati Inscription<sup>20</sup> of Aṃśuvarṃā dated 605 A.D.—*viditambhavatu bhavatāṅkukkuṭaśūkarāṇā.....nāṃ mallapotānāṃ matsyānāñcāvadhānena parituṣṭairasmābhirbhaṭṭādhikaraṇāpraveśena vaḥ prasādaḥ kṛto.....yadānīyaṃ yadā ca punardharmasaṅkarāṇi kāryāṇi samutpanne tadā rājakulaṃ svayampravicāraṇīyam.* (Line 4-9)

According to D. R. Regmi,<sup>21</sup> the inscription says the inhabitants (including *Brāhmaṇas*) of Bugāyumi village became expert in raising fowls, pigs and young *mallas* (special kind of fish) and fishes. It seems they were engaged in these works from earlier and now they became expert. Being pleased with their work the king prohibited the entry of *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* who was most probably the authoritative conclave of *Brāhmaṇas* to oversee the conduct and life style of the *Brāhmaṇas* in the state.

Further the royal authority encouraged to continue the above venture with the same efficiency. If anyone questioned the propriety of these activities of the inhabitants of the village, (*dharmasaṅkarāṇi*) the royal palace or members of royal family would silence those objectors.

Local body *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* which is a group of *Brāhmaṇas* to look after the system of *Varnaśrama* was restricted to enter in that village where such work was going on. It is only because the *Brāhmaṇas* of that village were engaged in cattle rising with other casts. Probably they were getting married or having relationship with the other śudras also. For the poor economy of Nepal, rulers are compelled to keep such liberal outlook which reflected in Bungmati Inscription. Aṃśuvarṃā had the anxiety that the *Brāhmaṇas* who were deviated

from their traditional duty and were participating in the special work, would be questionable in front of *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa*. For the interest of state economy the royal authority did not show the conservative attitude regarding caste and profession and require smooth run of the said activities.

There are many inscriptional instances where *Brāhmaṇas* took other professions except *yajan*, *yājana*, *adhyayana*, *adhyāpanā*. There are instances from the Indian inscriptions and *Smṛtiśāstras* where *Brāhmaṇas* were not only engaged in sacrificial performances but also served the rulers as counsellors and generals. The Karamdāṇḍā Stone Linga Inscription of Kumāragupta I<sup>22</sup> dated 436 A.D., shows that Śikharasvamin the minister and *Kumārāmātya* of *Mahārājādhirāja* Chandragupta II have been originated in a Brahmin family. It indicates that during this period Brahmins are recruited to the administrative office and also in the army as we know Śikharasvamin's son, Pṛthivīsenā, became promoted to the position of *Mahābalādhikṛta*. Sometimes the *Brāhmaṇas* were engaged to teach the *Śudras* and performed their sacred rights.<sup>23</sup> During the Sena period *Brāhmaṇas* migrated to Bengal from South Karnāṭaka were called *Brāhmakṣatriyas*. The term *Brāhmakṣatri* has been explained by D.R. Bhandarkar – "those who were *Brāhmaṇas* first and became *Khṣatriya* afterwards and in other words it might be said that those who exchanged their priestly activities for martial pursuits."<sup>24</sup> From the Tālagunda Pillar Inscription<sup>25</sup> of Śāntivarman it is known that Mayūrasraman the orthodox and learned *Brāhmaṇa* ancestor of the Kadamba family was followed by his son Kaṅgavarman who changed the dynastic title from the Brahmanical termination of *śraman* to *varman*.

Later *Brāhmaṇas* followed many other professions both high and low. A chain of *Brāhmaṇa* kings rules in Samatāṭa in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. as mentioned by Hiuen Tsang in his description.<sup>26</sup> The Bhubaneśvar Inscription of Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva<sup>27</sup> supplies us the information that Bhavadeva was the *Brāhmaṇa* minister of Harivarman.

In the Pehoa Inscription<sup>28</sup> (7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) a *Brāhmaṇa* Vāmuka, is mentioned as a horse – dealer. The Siyadoni Inscription (10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) informs about a *Brāhmaṇa* named Dhamāka who was betel – seller. The Icchwar Inscription<sup>29</sup> mention that a *Brāhmaṇa* *Senāpati* named Madanapālavarman was granted land by king Paramardi of the Candella

dynasty. The Bādal Pillar Inscription<sup>30</sup> records a *praśasti* of five generations of *Brāhmaṇas* who served as hereditary minister under the four *Pāla* kings. The *Brāhmaṇas* Devaśarman and Damodargupta served king Jayāpiḍa of Kāshmir as his minister and chief counsellor, respectively.<sup>31</sup>

The *Brāhmaṇas* could also trade but they were forbidden from selling salt, milk, honey the intoxicating liquors, cooked food, arms, indigo silk, wooden, cow, hides, e.t.c.<sup>32</sup> They could not make a living by cattle – rearing and usury, but could freely and lawfully deal in corn grass and wood.<sup>33</sup>

In the ancient *Smṛitis*, occupation of money – lending has been regarded badly for the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Kṣatriyas* but Brahspati has considered it as a *Āpad – Vr̥tti* <sup>34</sup>

The *Dvijas* were not to take professions regarded as legal for the *Śudras*. Some law givers were lenient and were of the opinion that where a *Brāhmaṇa*'s life was in danger, he could practise a *Śudra*'s vocation.

Prayag Raj Sharma quotes from *Lichhavi Kālakā Abhilekha* of Dhanavajra Vajrācārya in his *The Land System of the Lichhavis in Nepal*- “References to *Brāhmaṇas* can be found in the Lichhavi inscriptions in the time of the Mānadeva I, in connection with making gifts of land to them. Later we see that the *Brāhmaṇas* themselves had become large land owners and made their own land endowments in support of diverse charitable causes” <sup>35</sup>

Regmi says-

“Yuan Chwang talks of a *Kṣatriya* dynasty ruling over Nepal and of numerous *Brāhmaṇas* who pursued the calling of priests in the society. They were so numerous, that the Chinese pilgrim could not have their exact number.”<sup>36</sup>

Licchavi society was regulated in accordance with the norms of contemporary India, but many of the local indigenous patterns continued to flourish. *Brāhmaṇas* were not all in all in the society of ancient Nepal, but at the same period it is observed that in India or in Bengal they had enormous power and importance in the society. The *Brāhmaṇas* of Bungmati village were encouraged by the royal authority to transgress their *svadharmā* for

the benefit of the state economy. *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* (official group of *Brāhmaṇas*) was restricted to enter into the village in this purpose. There are inscriptional instances of later period in India when *Brāhmaṇas* started to take so called low professions such as horse-dealer, betel-seller. But in Nepal this practice had started at early age on 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Nepal kings who were the protector of *Varṇāśramadharmā* like Gupta kings had to be liberal to enhance the poor condition of their economy.

Sometimes *Brāhmaṇapurassarān* is omitted in the inscriptions from Nepal and the term *Pradhānapurassarān* appeared. The *Pāñcālīs* who had the important role in village community were associated with the village elders to settle the immediate disputes in the village. Cultural activities and institutions were maintained by corporate bodies (*Goṣṭhī*). *Brāhmaṇas* may present as an important and chief member of these communities but other personalities who were the members had no less importance than *Brāhmaṇas*. It is said that “Assisted by a few other specialists such as the potter, the carpenter, and the blacksmith, the village community consisted almost entirely of the farming families (*kṣetrins*) or (*kuṭumbins*).”<sup>37</sup>

The community looked after its temples, irrigation canals, wells, roads, farms, and orchards, water (both drinking and irrigating) most seriously. The community based social system, the first step to democracy, developed in Nepal in this period.

---

### References

1. Regmi, D.R., *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal*, Vol. I, plate no.CV.
1. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 119-120
2. *Ibid.*, p.1-6.
3. *Ibid.*, P. 19-20.
4. Banerjee, Manabendu, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of Nepal*, p. 48.
5. Regmi, D.R., *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal*, Vol. I., p.59.
6. *Ibid.*, p.133-134.
7. Sundaram, J., *SEF*, IV, p. 200.
8. Regmi, D.R., *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal*, Vol. I, p. 70-71.



9. *Ibid.*, p.100-101.
10. Sundaram, J., *SEF*, IV, p. 113-114
11. Banerjee, Manabendu, *op. cit.*, p.16.
12. Regmi, D.R., *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal*, Vol. I., p.66-67.
13. Banerjee, Manabendu, *op. cit.*, p.44
14. Regmi, D.R., *op. cit.*, III, p.113.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Malla, K.P., “Linguistic Archaeology of the Nepal Valley: A Preliminary Report”, *Kailash*, Vol. VIII, no. 1-2, p.7.
17. Regmi, D.R., *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal*, Vol. I, p. 51-52.
18. *Ibid.*, p.47-48.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.
20. *Ibid.*, p.70-71.
21. Regmi, D.R., *op. cit.*, III, pp.129-130.
22. *EI*, Vol. X, 1909-10, pp. 70f.
23. *Prāyaścittaprakaraṇa* of Bhavadeva, p.60.
24. Majumder, N.G., *Inscription of Bengal*, Vol. III, p.44.
25. *EI*, Vol. VIII, 1905-1906, pp. 24f.
26. Majumder, R.C., *History of Ancient Bengal*, pp. 77-78.
27. *CBI*, p. 349.
28. *EI*, I, p.184.
29. *IA*, XXV, p. 207.
30. *CII*, IV, p. 166.



31. *Rājatarāṅginī*, IV, *śloka*s, 469, 496.
32. *Ātri Smṛti*, 21 *Vaśiṣṭha Smṛti*, II, 31, *Parāśara Smṛti*, II, 7.
33. Sachau, E.C., *Alberuni's India, two vols. in one*, London, 1914.
34. *KKT*, *Gṛhasthakāṇḍa*, p. 221.
35. Sharma, Prayag Raj, “The Land System of the Licchavis in Nepal”, *Kailash*, vol. X (1983), p.26.
36. Regmi, D.R., *Ancient Nepal*, p.199.
37. Malla, K.P., “Epigraphy and Society in Ancient Nepal: A critique of Regmi 1983”, *CNAS*, Vol. 13-1, p. 68.
- =====

#### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Regmi, D.R., *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal*, 3 Vols. Abhinava Publication, New Delhi, 1983.
- Sundaram, J., *Sanskrit Epigraphs (Foreign); Uṭṭāṅkita Vidyā Aranya Trust; Vol. IV, part-III*.
- Malla, K.P., “Linguistic Archaeology of the Nepal Valley: A Preliminary Report”, *Kailash*, Vol.VIII-1-2, 1981.
- *Prāyaścittaprakaraṇa* of Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva, ed. Girishcandra Vedantatirtha, Rajsahi, 1972.
- Majumder, N. G., *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. III, Rajshahi, 1929.
- *Parāśara Smṛti*, ed. R.C. Sharma, Moradabad, 1925.
- *Vaśiṣṭha Smṛti*, trans. J. Jolly, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1889.
- Sachau, E.C., *Alberuni's India*, London, 1914.
- “Epigraphy and Society in Ancient Nepal: A critique of Regmi 1983”, *CNAS*, Vol. 13-1, December, 1985.
- Regmi, D.R., *Ancient Nepal*, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyaya, Calcutta, 1969.

- Banerjee, Manabendu, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of Nepal*, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Kolkata, 1989.
  - *Epigraphia Indica*, Calcutta.
  - *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, Calcutta, 1967.
  - *Indian Antiquary*, Bombay, Vol. IX.
  - J.F. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Calcutta, Vol. III.
  - *Rājatarāṅginī*, trans. by M. A. Stein, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1988.
-