

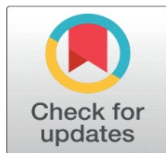
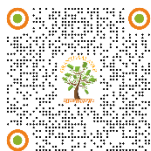
# SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY OF GOPALI CASTE OF NEPAL: A CASE STUDY IN MACHHEGAUN, CHANDRAGIRI 9, KATHMANDU, NEPAL

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**Received** 02 August 2024

**Accepted** 08 September 2024

**Published** 31 October 2024

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## DOI

[10.29121/granthaalayah.v12.i10.2024.5813](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v12.i10.2024.5813)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The Gopali caste, a subgroup within the Newar community, has a unique socio-cultural heritage that remains under-researched and underrepresented. This study examines the social and cultural conditions of the Gopali caste in Ward No. 9 of Chandragiri Municipality using a qualitative approach. Data was collected from primary sources such as on-site observation, participant observation, focus group discussions, and interviews, and secondary sources including books and online materials. The findings reveal that the Gopalis, who migrated from the Mathura region of India around 3,500 years ago, have historically maintained unique social and ritual practices while living in seclusion. Today, Gopali settlements are primarily in the southwestern Kathmandu Valley and Makwanpur district. Despite diversifying into various occupations, they face limited participation in Nepal's administrative and political processes. This research underscores the importance of recognizing the Gopalis as a separate ethnic group to preserve their cultural heritage. Future research should focus on detailed ethnographic studies to document their traditions and explore ways to integrate the Gopalis into Nepal's broader socio-political landscape while preserving their distinct identity.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Identity, Heritage, Newar, Hindu

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a country renowned for its rich diversity in castes, languages, religions, and cultures. According to the 2021 census, Nepal is home to 142 caste groups, 124 national languages, and 10 foreign languages [National Statistics office. \(2024\)](#). The Gopalis, who reside in Ward No. 9 of Chandragiri Municipality, contribute to this intricate social tapestry. They belong to the Newar community, one of the many castes in Nepal, and have historically lived in the hilly regions of the country [Adhikari \(2016\)](#). The Gopalis' ancestry dates back approximately 3,500 years,

identifying them as descendants of Nepal's earliest rulers. Following the loss of their kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley, they gradually moved to the southern hilly slopes, establishing settlements in areas like Chitlang, Tistung, and Palung, which remain significant Gopali communities today.

During the unification of Nepal in the 18th century, some Gopali families returned to their ancestral lands, specifically to Machhegaun in what is now Ward No. 9 of Chandragiri Municipality. Today, there are 35 Gopali households in this area, located in the northwest corner of Kathmandu Valley (Gopali, H.B. Personal Interview, 2024, June 10). Since ancient times, the Gopali caste has lived in seclusion, apart from other castes, maintaining their distinct way of life due to minimal contact with outside communities (Gopali, G.B. personal communication, 2024, July 2). However, from the Medieval period, as they encountered the Newar community of the Kathmandu Valley, they gradually absorbed aspects of the Newar language, religion, traditions, and culture.

Historically, the Gopalis were originally classified as Chhetriya K. C. (2013). Later, as they integrated into the Newar social structure, they came to be recognized as part of the Newar community rather than as a separate or single identity (Gopali, A. personal communication, 2024, June 12). Consequently, the Gopali caste is not officially recognized as a distinct group in Nepal, and they are not listed separately in the national census. According to local sources, the current population of Gopalis in Nepal is estimated to be around 10,000, with 176 residing in the study area (Gopali, K. personal communication, 2024, May 2). The inability to maintain a distinct Gopali identity has led to a gradual erosion of their socio-cultural heritage.

Geographically, Nepal is situated between two large neighboring countries, India and China. Throughout history, people from these nations have migrated to and settled in Nepal. The northern region of Nepal has a significant population of Chinese origin, while the southern region, which borders India, has a predominant population of Indian origin Department of Information and Broadcasting. (2018). In the hilly region, the original inhabitants of Nepal have long been indigenous groups or communities Sherchan (2004). However, it is believed that these tribes also migrated from India and China via Tibet thousands of years ago Bista (2000). Similarly, the Gopali caste is one of the groups that entered Nepal from the Indian subcontinent in ancient times Sharma (1978). Although the Gopalis belong to the Hindu Arya caste, their rituals and cultural practices are distinctly ethnic and indigenous Upadhaya & Shiwakoti (1955).

In modern times, despite living near the capital of Nepal, the Gopali caste has received little attention from researchers or the state. There has been a lack of effort in preserving their social and cultural traditions, developing tourism, or utilizing their cultural heritage. As a result, the Gopalis' social and cultural identity is gradually disappearing. Historically, they have sustained themselves through cattle rearing, but today they are increasingly disconnected from this traditional occupation. Their indigenous lifestyle and rituals, from birth to death, are also being assimilated into mainstream culture.

In his book *An Account of Nepaul*, Kirkpatrick (1811) notes that Nepal has been home to various ethnic or caste groups since ancient times, emphasizing the country's caste-based plurality. While he does not specifically mention the Gopali caste, he includes them under the broader Newar community. Although Kirkpatrick identifies the Newars as an indigenous group of Nepal, he does not focus on the Gopalis of Chandragiri Municipality Ward No. 9 of modern Nepal. Similarly, in *People of Nepal*, Bista (2000) mentions 36 castes of Nepal, including the Newar community, but does not examine the socio-cultural situation of the Gopali caste in

the specific study area. [Gautam & Thapa \(1994\)](#), discussed 26 castes within Nepal, including those within the Newar society, but again, the Gopalis were not studied in detail.

Given the lack of focused research on the Gopali caste in the study area, this study seeks to address that gap by providing an in-depth examination of their socio-cultural situation. Although the Gopali caste has lived in Nepal since ancient times, there remains a significant lack of in-depth research on their sociocultural issues. This study addresses the gap in understanding the Gopalis, who, despite residing near the capital, have not been extensively studied. The importance of this research lies in its potential to enhance the recognition and significance of the Gopali caste, a group with deep historical roots as Nepal's earliest rulers, pioneers of agriculture, and leaders in animal husbandry. The Gopalis have also preserved their indigenous traditions over time. The primary goal of this study is to examine the social and cultural conditions of the Gopali caste, particularly those living in Ward No. 9 of Chandragiri Municipality. By shedding light on this overlooked and fading subject, the study aims to preserve and highlight the unique sociocultural heritage of the Gopali community.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research followed a qualitative approach due to the inherently social nature of the study. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the social and cultural dynamics of the Gopali caste, an indigenous group in Nepal whose identity remains marginalized.

### 2.1. DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the Gopali caste's socio-cultural conditions, multiple data collection techniques were employed:

- 1) **ON-SITE OBSERVATION:** Conducted ten instances of on-site observation to gather firsthand insights into the daily life and practices of the Gopali caste.
- 2) **PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION:** Engaged in participant observation to build rapport with the community and gain a deeper understanding of their social interactions and cultural practices.
- 3) **FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS:** Organized focus group discussions to facilitate open dialogue among community members, allowing for the collection of diverse perspectives and shared experiences.
- 4) **INTERVIEWS:** Conducted interviews with individuals selected through purposive sampling, focusing on those who could provide detailed and relevant insights into the study's objectives.

### 2.2. SAMPLING METHOD

Employed a non-probability purposive sampling method to select interview participants, ensuring that the insights gathered were directly relevant to the study's objectives. This method was chosen to identify individuals who possess specific knowledge or experiences pertinent to the research questions.

### 2.3. DATA CLEANING AND ANALYSIS

After collecting qualitative data, a rigorous cleaning process was undertaken to ensure that only essential and relevant sources were retained for analysis. This step was crucial in maintaining the quality and accuracy of the data.

Both primary and secondary sources were utilized for this study.

- 1) **PRIMARY SOURCES:** Included data collected through on-site observations, participant observations, focus group discussions, and interviews.
- 2) **SECONDARY SOURCES:** Adopted a library-based approach for secondary data collection, ensuring the use of only the most relevant resources to support the study.

### 2.4. ANALYTICAL METHODS

The research is grounded in both descriptive and analytical methods.

- 1) **DESCRIPTIVE METHOD:** Used to provide a detailed account of the social and cultural dynamics of the Gopali caste.
- 2) **ANALYTICAL METHOD:** Employed to critically analyze the data collected, with a focus on understanding the underlying patterns and themes.

### 2.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the sensitive and emotional nature of some observations, these aspects have been carefully analyzed and presented. The study ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants, respecting their privacy and cultural values.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the concept of caste, which primarily refers to a community. Such caste communities are not only distinct in racial and ethnic terms but are also historically established groups with shared language and cultural practices. To be recognized as a caste, there must be mutual differences within the community, including variations in activities, as well as racial and ethnic distinctions. However, as [Darwin \(2012\)](#) noted, it is challenging to precisely determine the degree of difference necessary or present between any groups. According to the Nepali Advanced Dictionary, caste is defined as a division of people or entities that are separated or identified based on ethnicity and geographical boundaries [Parajuli \(2012\)](#). In this sense, a caste is a human community with a unique identity. The Gopalis are one such distinct human caste or ethnic group, historically isolated and maintaining their own cultural and social identity.

Geographically, Nepal is divided into three main regions: the Himalayan, Hilly, and Terai provinces. The different castes living in Nepal are also geographically distinct. For example, those from the Himalayan region are rarely found in the Terai, and vice versa [Bhattachan \(2009\)](#). Nepal's diverse geography contributes to its varied climate, with colder temperatures in the north and a warmer climate in the south. The country's elevation ranges from 59 meters to 8,848.86 meters above sea level. The focus of this study is Machhegaun, located in Ward No. 9 of Chandragiri Municipality, within the Kathmandu District of Bagmati Province, in the hilly region of Nepal. Currently, Nepal is divided into seven provinces. The Gopali caste, which

has been residing in the mid-hill region of Nepal since ancient times, is the subject of this research.

The Gopali caste has resided in the Kathmandu Valley since ancient times. Today, they are recognized as a branch of the Newar community and have yet to fully reclaim their original identity [Adhikari \(2016\)](#) According to Hindu religious texts, the Gopalis arrived in the Kathmandu Valley during the Dwapara era, accompanying Lord Krishna, who hailed from Dwarika in India [Yogi \(1956\)](#). [According to the Hindu epics, the time is divided into four ages: Satya, Treta, Dwapar, and Kali]. At that time, the Kathmandu Valley was submerged in water, resembling a lake, so the Gopalis settled on the higher ground surrounding it. As cowherds, they were called "Gopal," which means cowherd in Sanskrit [Adhikari \(2016\)](#) They built cattle sheds near their settlements and established themselves in areas such as Mrigasthali, Kirtipur, Thankot, and present-day Gaushala, Matatirtha, and the surrounding area of Pashupatinath Temple [Shrestha \(2009\)](#) Given this history, various areas within the current Chandragiri Municipality can be considered as original Gopali settlements. The specific study area is Ward No. 9 of Chandragiri Municipality, which includes Machhegaon. This area is also home to the ancient Machhenarayan Temple, believed to be the first incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

### 3.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Cowherds used to graze their animals in Gaucharan, forests and pastures in Gokul, Vrindavan, Mathura etc. areas of present India in the ancient period. As their population grew, these pastoral communities spread to different regions. At that time, various areas in what is now Nepal were ideal for cattle grazing. Although the Kathmandu Valley was full of water, surrounding areas like Matatirtha, Banasthali, Machhegaun, Thankot, Kirtipur, etc. were suitable for human settlement ([Yogi, 1956](#)). The cowherds who accompanied Lord Krishna to the valley eventually settled in these locations [Right \(1972\)](#). The Gopas and Gopis who migrated from Mathura, India, established cowsheds and settled in the Matatirtha area. The region where the present-day Tribhuvan International Airport is located was also highly suitable for cattle grazing. Additionally, the area around the current Pashupatinath temple, including Bankali and the banks of the Bagmati River, provided excellent grazing land and drinking water for the cattle.

Since ancient times, Nepal has been renowned for its stunning natural beauty and as a sacred abode of gods and sages. Due to its hilly terrain and secure environment, people from various regions migrated and settled here, making Nepal a melting pot of diverse cultures [Karki \(2068\)](#). Among the early settlers were tribes such as the Kirant, Mongol, Netigro, Agneya, Dravida, and Arya Nordic [Adhikari \(2073\)](#). The Mongol and Aryan cultural traditions were introduced to Nepal by ethnic groups migrating from the Sino-Tibetan region in the north and India in the south. Over time, these diverse influences blended to form what is now considered the original Nepali culture ([Gopali, G.B. personal communication, 2024, July 8](#)). The Gopali caste was among the ancient groups that settled in Nepal. According to folklore, the shrine of Pashupatinath (Shivalinga) was established on the banks of the Bagmati River, with offerings of milk by their cow named Bahuhri of these early Gopalis. This tradition is reflected in the Gopali community's belief that they migrated from India in ancient times. The popular Gopali song, "Ase re ase he Vrij Gwalini Atimanah tan chaya chhaye" (Wait, wait, O Vrij Gwalini, why are you angry like this?) highlights their historical connection and identity ([Gopali, B. personal communication, 2014, June 8](#)). Thus, it is evident that the Gopali caste has been a part of Nepal's history since ancient times.



In ancient times, the Gopali people settled in the Kathmandu Valley and ruled Nepal for nearly 500 years. Today, their descendants are found in various areas of the Kathmandu Valley and its southern regions, including Thankot, Matatirtha, Kirtipur, Daman, Tistung, Palung, Bajravarahi, Kunchhal, Gahte, Kulgaon, and Okharwot in the Makwanpur district. They have also settled in Shikharbot and other nearby areas. To this day, members of the Gopali caste often identify themselves as descendants of Yaduvanshi Krishna (Gopali, G.B. personal communication, 2024, July 2)

Historically, the Gopali people, like some other upper castes in Nepal, wore a sacred thread called Janai, a mark of high caste status. Brahmins and Chhetris continue to wear Janai today. Traditionally, the Gopali people were vegetarians, but due to Nepal's cold climate, they gradually began to include fish and meat in their diet (Gopali, R.B. personal communication, 2024, June 8). Such cultural and behavioural shifts are also observed among tribes in other parts of the world.

Gopalis have been counted as residents of Nepal since ancient times so they are known as an indigenous people of Nepal. It means a race, a primitive inhabitant or a primitive caste that has been living in a certain land, country or place since ancient times Parajuli (2012). Such an aboriginal ethnic community has a different origin from the mainstream or national community, has its own specific and original cultural and linguistic traditions and its religious beliefs are based on ancient naturalism, and worship of nature such as land and seasons (Gopali, M. personal communication, 2014, May 14). Tribals are those people who in early or primitive times settled on a specific land after cutting down the forest and continue to live in the same place even in the present time. The first inhabitant of a certain land whose historical and original traditions persist Bantha Magar (2064). Based on the fact that this characteristic of tribals is also seen in the Gopali caste of the study area, they are also believed to be the tribal group of Nepal.

### 3.2. SOCIAL CONDITION OF GOPALI

The smallest unit of human social organisation is the family, defined by factors such as marriage, blood relations, and upbringing. Families can be categorised as either joint or nuclear. A joint family includes three or four generations living together, while a nuclear family consists of just parents and their unmarried children. In the Gopali caste, most families are joint. Within this caste, there is a tradition of showing special respect to women, yet they are not typically involved in making major decisions regarding family and societal matters. The relationship between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Gopali families is characterized by mutual respect and affection, similar to that of a mother and daughter. This dynamic contributes to harmonious family life (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, July 11.). Despite the respect afforded to women, the family structure remains predominantly male-dominated. There is a tradition of respecting women in Nepali society, but because the society here is male-dominated, no matter how many rights are given to women, women are found to have no rights by nature Thapa (2009).

In Gopali society, the eldest member of the family typically serves as the head of the household. If the head is too old or infirm to manage the household, the responsibility usually passes to his eldest son. In cases where there is no son but only a daughter, it is customary for the ancestral property to be inherited by the daughter (Gopali, M. personal communication, 2024, May 19.). However, married daughters generally do not receive shares of the property. In families without sons, there is also a tradition where the daughter brings her husband into the parent's home.

The Gopali caste has a communal organization known as Guthi, which is established for collective social work. The Guthi creates a fund to address social issues and is led by a community leader called Thakali, along with other members. In the event of family disputes or separations, the Guthi's Thakali plays a crucial role in dividing ancestral property. Traditionally, Gopali caste members prefer to resolve minor disputes within the Guthi rather than reporting to government offices (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, July 4). However, some members of the Gopali caste are now beginning to approach administrative courts or police stations for complaints.

Currently, there is a growing trend among the younger generation of Gopali caste members in the study area towards nuclear family structures (Gopali, M. personal communication, 2024, July 8). Respect for elders is an integral part of Gopali social culture, with seniors imparting social traditions to the younger generation. Inter-caste marriage is traditionally viewed as taboo within this society, although some young women are beginning to challenge these norms by marrying outside their caste.

The educational levels remain relatively low, reflecting their tribal status. Higher education attainment is notably scarce within this community, with very few women pursuing advanced education. Gopali women are primarily occupied with household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and laundry. During their limited free time, they often engage in agricultural activities, including vegetable and grain production (Gopali, B. Personal communication, 2024, May 19). Women in Gopali society contribute significantly to agricultural work, often more than men.

Despite their considerable involvement in household and agricultural tasks, Gopali women face significant educational and social challenges. Currently, land available for farming among the Gopali is minimal, with those who own land focusing on vegetable cultivation. In addition to farming, some Gopali women are employed in various small businesses.

The younger generation of Gopali girls shows limited interest in agricultural work, often citing discomforts such as sunburn, mud on their skin, and dirt under their nails as reasons for their reluctance (Gopali, P. personal communication, 2024, July 4). Additionally, women in Gopali society face discrimination based on gender, caste, and class. They are typically excluded from holding positions within the Guthi, such as Guthi Thakali, reflecting broader patterns of gender-based inequality within and outside their caste.

In Gopali society, women's roles are traditionally governed by the men in their lives. During their youth, they are under the control of their parents; after marriage, they are managed by their husbands; and if they become widows, they are typically overseen by their sons (Gopali, G.B. Personal communication, 2024, July 2). Widowed women in Gopali society are expected to follow certain customs, such as not wearing bangles, vermilion, or other traditional adornments. Historically, widows have faced social stigma, discrimination, and harsh treatment, although such attitudes have notably diminished in recent times.

Traditionally, when a husband dies, a widow is expected to wear only white clothing for one year and to avoid public gatherings such as fairs and markets. However, contemporary changes are evident as Gopali women increasingly participate in public activities during festivals and fairs. They are now involved in collective savings groups, cooperatives, and other village funds, using these resources to support their families and enjoy festivals (Gopali, R. personal communication, 2024, July 9). Despite being considered a traditionally conservative

society, Gopali women are slowly embracing modernization. This shift indicates a gradual transformation in both societal norms and individual roles within the Gopali community.

In the Gopali society, which has a tribal structure, children are raised with a significant degree of independence. They are well cared for and nurtured within their communities. Despite this, there is a lack of awareness about children's rights. As they grow older, around the ages of 9 to 10, boys begin assisting their fathers, while girls help their mothers. Children aged 10 to 12 take on responsibilities for younger siblings, looking after and protecting them (Gopali, B.B. personal communication, 2024, May 19). Gopali children typically start attending school between the ages of 4 and 5, with most attending government schools. Currently, there is a trend in Nepal where wealthier families send their children to boarding schools, while children from all backgrounds, including the Gopali caste, predominantly attend government schools or colleges. Many Gopali children do not complete higher education and often drop out before finishing their studies (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, June 14). Those who leave school often enter the labour market, and child labour is a significant issue within this community

Discriminatory practices are observed in this society, with sons often being enrolled in boarding schools and daughters in government schools. Due to the generally modest economic conditions of Gopali families, there is limited investment in higher education. Children from very poor families frequently drop out of school and seek employment abroad, particularly in Gulf countries such as Qatar. There is a notable absence of individuals with advanced degrees, such as master's, MPhil, or PhD, within the Gopali community (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, June 4).

The social organization of the Gopali caste and the leadership of the individual, family, group and group, kinship system, and property are based on their traditional fundamental rules. Such basic rules are of a hierarchical nature that have been going on for generations. The people of this Gopali caste solve such problems collectively when there is a financial crisis in the society or when there is an economic crisis. People of the Gopali caste work together in the development and construction of their village tolls, roads, sewers, etc. (Gopali, T.B. personal communication, 2024, July 14). In this society, there is a tradition of being busy for a long time in pilgrimages, festivals, feasts, and religious activities. Such Jattras (fairs) and festivals are held publicly by people gathering at a special place. Accordingly, people of Gopali caste are found to have a normal economic condition on average, so their standard of living is also normal.

### **3.3. ORGANIZATION AND CHANGES IN SOCIETY**

The social organization of the Gopali caste functions much like an extended family, with traditions and rules passed down through generations. Historically, the ancestors of the Gopali caste established various norms to maintain order, discipline, and dignity within their community. These rules encompass prohibitions against inter-caste marriage, adherence to traditional professions, and guidelines on diet, clothing, festivals, and ceremonial practices (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, May 19). Oversight of these social rules is managed by individuals within the Guthi, Thakali, and similar organizations. When a member of the Gopali caste violates these established norms, they are summoned to the Guthi house for a reminder of their responsibilities. These regulations have been in place for centuries, predating the formal laws established by the government of Nepal.



Despite their long history, these social rules are periodically revised to adapt to changing societal conditions.

Over time, they have become deeply embedded as internal, religious, caste, and traditional customs (Gopali, R. personal communication, 2024, May 2). Although Gopali society appears orderly, underlying issues such as gender discrimination, family violence, and conflict persist. These problems are exacerbated by continuing illiteracy, poverty, backwardness, and social biases from the state, along with differing behaviours from other communities.

In contemporary times, the effects of globalization have led to a growing trend among people to emulate economically prosperous, educated, and progressive societies. This shift has increased violations of traditional social rules within the Gopali caste. Today, young people from this caste are increasingly engaging in activities such as inter-caste love marriages, defying Guthi directives, disregarding the authority of community leaders, and failing to participate in traditional mass processions and festivals. Moreover, social issues such as gender discrimination, assault, theft, robbery, murder, and rape are on the rise (Gopali, D. personal communication, 2024, June 14). These problems are primarily attributed to the dual pressures of rising unemployment among the younger generation of the Gopali caste and the influence of external societal norms.

### 3.4. CULTURAL CONDITIONS

Culture encompasses various aspects of life, including food, daily behaviour, clothing, jewellery, lifestyle, religious practices, art, musical instruments, songs, music, and dance. Communities around the world have developed unique cultural practices, shaped by their local environments and conditions, to enhance and simplify their lives Baral (1993). The Gopali caste, for example, has created and adhered to specific cultural norms, known as rituals, that are tailored to their environmental and ecological circumstances. These rules and traditions, established by their ancestors, are designed to promote a more organized and harmonious way of living. They reflect a long history of adapting to and interacting with their surroundings, ensuring that cultural practices remain relevant and effective in their specific context.

Culture includes elements such as food, daily habits, clothing, jewellery, lifestyles, religious practices, art, musical instruments, songs, music, and dance. People in various parts of the world develop and follow cultural practices tailored to their local environment and conditions to make life easier and more manageable Piddington (1952). Similarly, the Gopali caste has established and followed specific cultural norms, known as rituals, which are adapted to their environmental and ecological conditions. These rules, created by their ancestors based on practical experience, help simplify and enhance daily living. By aligning their practices with their surroundings, the Gopali people maintain traditions that facilitate a harmonious and organized way of life. People living in different parts of the world have created rules according to the local environment and conditions and applied them in their society to bring ease and simplicity in their living MacIivar & Page(1950). Accordingly, the people of the Gopali caste have been creating and implementing various caste rules based on the environment and ecological conditions of the place where they live. Such caste rules are called Sanskar. Because of such rules, it becomes very easy and easy for people to live. The ancestors made such rules based on their experience and tests to suit the situation.

The Rules developed for societies, castes, groups, genders, etc. are collectively referred to as culture [Baral \(1993\)](#). Since the dawn of civilization, humans have been establishing and evolving cultures to meet their needs [Aapte \(1997\)](#). Culture represents a compilation of accumulated experiences, refined over time as civilizations progress, incorporating new knowledge and practices. Its primary goal is to replace negative thoughts and feelings with positive ones. Similarly, the ancestors of the Gopali caste developed and implemented cultural practices to secure the future of their descendants and ensure adherence to specific rules and conduct for their caste group.

Different castes, classes, and communities around the world each have their own unique cultures, which form the basis of their identity [Baral \(1993\)](#). The Gopali caste, like many others, has its distinct cultural practices that span from birth to death. Traditionally, Gopali people engaged in cattle rearing, and their homes were typically designed with the ground floor for housing animals while the upper floors were reserved for living spaces. However, due to factors such as the decline in available pasture, lower income from cattle rearing compared to other professions, and urbanization, the Gopali people have largely abandoned this traditional occupation ([Gopali, R. personal communication, 2024, May 19](#)). Consequently, their modern homes have also evolved. Despite these changes, Gopali houses still retain some traditional elements. Many continue to feature small, tiled roofs, although some have adopted sloped roofs more common among other castes.

During the development of culture, people of Gopali caste worship Banadevi, Ganesha, Bhairav, Ram, Krishna, Matchendranath, Vishnu, Bhimsen, Gopinath, Gopini, Adibuddha, Brahma, Saraswati, Tulsi, Pashupatinath, Guhyeshwari, Karunamaya, Mahalaxmi, Chundevi, Kumari, etc. These are the most beloved gods and goddesses of the Gopali caste. They consider these gods and goddesses to be their role models, sources of inspiration and protectors, guardians. In their songs, bhajans (hymns), etc., they invoke shrines like Bagmati, Bishnumati, Yamuna, Bhagirathi, Kuleshwari, Brindavan, Godavari, Gangasagar, Vaikuntha. Lord Krishna and Goddess Radha are worshipped by the Gopali caste's Istadevata (most beloved God) ([Gopali, H.B. personal communication, 2024, June 10](#)). In addition, they worship the eight wives of Lord Krishna, Rukmini, Satyabhama, Jambavati, Kalindi, Mitravinda, Nagnajiti (also called Satya), Bhadra and Lakshmana (also called Madra) are considered. It is found that there are some differences in the cultures of Gopali people who live near urban areas and those who live in rural areas. As this study area is located close to Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, there are many distortions in the culture of the people of the Gopali caste in this study area.

The traditional foods of the Gopali caste typically consists of pulse, rice, vegetables, and pickles. However, during festivals, they prepare and enjoy a variety of special dishes, including Mutuli, Kwyanti, Samyabji, Gojamari, Hakumari, Ghee, Chaku, Tarul, Masko Bara, Halwa, Chatamari, Kachila, Jal, Choyla, Bhunrila, Takha, Kwala, Dahi, Chiura, and Fish, etc. The name of these dishes is in the Gopali language. It is customary for Gopali people to offer the same foods to their gods that they consume themselves ([Gopal, M. personal communication, 2024, May 19](#)). In contemporary times, new dishes such as Momo, Chowmein, and Thukpa have also become popular among the younger generation of Gopali people. While the younger members of the community embrace these modern foods, the older generation continues to prefer traditional dishes, maintaining that their traditional cuisine is superior (source). This shift in food preferences reflects the influence of other societies and castes on Gopali culture.

It is found that traditional superstitions are prevalent among the people of the Gopali caste. They especially believe in invisible things like ghosts and witches. If people get sick, they take them to the houses of senior people in the village neighbourhood to do the weeding. When a person falls ill in the society, they make a broom in the jar saying that the gods and goddesses are angry, demons, ghosts, dakinis, sankhini, nidhini, kichkanni, bayudosh, bhayuni, flying ghost, biramsan, wind, satojani. (Gopali, H.B. personal communication, 2024, June 10) At present, fishermen of the younger generation also go to the hospital when they fall ill.

People of the Gopali caste speak the language of the Bhotbarmeli family. This language is also found to have some differences in language depending on the location. The language spoken by the people of the Gopali caste is one of the Newari languages. Since the script of their language has disappeared, they write their language in the Devanagari script. (Gopali, B. personal communication, 2024, June 8)

Since the Gopalis are Hindus, they perform rituals from birth to death according to Hindu tradition. Such rites are Navaran, Pasni, Kshevar, Bratabandha (son's only), Gunyucholi (daughter's only), marriage and death rites. While performing these rituals, up to 20-30 years ago, priests of their caste used to do it, but at present, scholars of the Brahmin caste are called to perform the rituals (Gopali, G. personal communication, 2024, July 14).

In the Gopali society, when it is known that a married daughter is pregnant, it is customary to send gifts of nutritious food such as curd, bitten rice, beans, etc. from the parent's house. In the language of the Gopali caste, such a gift is called 'Dhawai Nakigu'. After completing this task, it is believed that the parents should not go to the daughter's house until the birth of the baby Adhikari (2016). In Gopali society, it is believed that the first child should be born in one's own home. It is customary to name a daughter on the sixth day after her birth and the fourth day after her son's birth. In the Gopali language, this work is called Busyankhwaki. In the Gopali society, it is customary to call the neighbours and relatives for a feast only when the eldest son's hair is shaved, but at present, all the sons are given a feast (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, Jun 12). On the day of combing the child's hair, they do the work of kirtan (hymn) with the Thakali of Guthi. In the Gopali society, on the day of Kshewar (having the hair shorn off) of a child, people from the Newar community of Kusule are called to play musical instruments. This Kusule caste is considered a lower caste of the Newar community. When the hair is shaved for the first time, it is done by the sister of the father or sister and before the hair falls to the ground, it is placed on a plate and taken to the river or Ganga which is considered holy (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, July 12). In the Gopali society, the son's marriage ceremony is done according to the Dindu tradition. But the daughter's marriage ceremony is not performed.

When a girl reaches the age of 12 in Gopali society, as a sign that she is gradually becoming a young woman, from Haribodhani Ekadashi (the eleventh day in a lunar fortnight) which falls around July, to Kartik Shukla Purnima (full moon night), after eating only one time, the last day of fasting, the girl wears her caste's unique dress of Gopali caste, Hakupatasi, punthul (black sari), tano wala choli (upper part of a woman's dress which has lace or tape for fastening). Wearing a new dress, the daughter goes to the house of a relative or neighbor to seek blessings. Relatives and neighbours also give her money and other gifts when she goes to seek blessings. On that day, it is customary to have a feast on the accusation where the daughters fast has ended (Gopali, B. personal, 2024, June 12,). In the Gopali society, when a son is marriageable, 3 to 5 guardians go together to the house of a Gopali girl in the village

to ask the daughter for marriage with curd and other gifts. If the guardians of that house give a daughter, they accept curd, fish and other gifts, otherwise, if they aren't ready to marry their daughter, they return those things as they are. Then they go to another house where there is a daughter and ask the daughter for get married. In this way, in the house where curd and other gifts are accepted, the process is carried forward to marry the daughter of that house. After the marriage is accepted, the mediator man will mark the wedding day (Gopali, S. personal communication, June 2024, 14). On the appointed day, the marriage is completed by taking the member of a marriage procession from the groom's house to the bride's house.

In Gopali society, if a person dies, he is placed on a stick outside the house. After death, the place covered with cow dung is covered with straw and kept there. Then the corpse is covered with a white cloth and a knife. If a person dies at night, they are taken for cremation only in the morning. The news of a person's death should be given to the people of Guthi first. Then it is given to neighbours and relatives. Guthi people attend the deceased's house with firewood. In this way, after people gather, they are taken to the ghat or the river bank for cremation (Gopali, M. personal communication, 2024, May 2). Women in Gopali society do not go to the river or ghat for cremation. They go crying till some distance from the house. In this society, there is a practice of burning human corpses. When the body is taken to a ghat or a river, musicians from the Newar community, Kusule, are called upon to play instruments and lead the procession. When giving incense to the body of the deceased, only one of the sons gives it. The family of the deceased should not eat fish, meat, pulses, rice, or legumes for 12 days. At that time they ate bitten rice, alcohol, sweets made from sugarcane, gundruk (dried vegetables made from mustard, radish, etc.) etc. The son who gave the dagbatti should remain active for 13 days (Gopali, G.B. personal communication, 2024, July 2). Only those Kriyaputri should not eat salt for 12 days. In the Gopali society, it is believed that if the father dies, the son should not eat curd for 1 year and if the mother dies, he should not eat milk for 6 months.

People of the Gopali caste follow many rituals. In this Gopali society, Chandi Purnima, Matatirtha Aunsi, Aaitabari Puja, Shravan Sankranti, Gathemangal, Nagapanchami Janaipurnima or Bhyaguta (Frog) Puja, Gokarna Aunsi or Father's Day Aunsi, Dashain, Tihar, Yamripunhi, Dhanyapurnima, Makar Sankranti, Basant Panchami, Ghode Jatra, Phagupurnima, Festivals like Chaitedeshai are celebrated. The names of the festivals are mostly in the Gopali language. In such festivals, they eat delicious food and dress well, go for a walk, dance and perform different cultural methods according to the festival.

In the Gopali society, grain dishes such as corn, wheat, millet, sorghum, curd, bitten rice, jam, wine, honey, and ghee, meat dishes such as goose, male buffalo, goat etc. and various vegetable dishes are prepared and eaten. Women of the Gopali caste are very skilled in making food. In the Gopali society, the dress is also of the original type. Men tie a patuka on the waist, wear a dhoti below the waist to the knees, and wear a bhoto, pagari, etc. Similarly, women of this caste wear choli, fariya (sari), and tie patuka. They tie a white patuka over the black hakupatasi (black sari), wear a turban and wear a white home-made cloth called 'gacha' (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, 19 May). They wear shoes made of straw on their feet. At present, the trend of men wearing Daura Surwal (Nepali dress), Ishtkot, pants, kameez (sirt), coats, and shoes is increasing.

Women of the Gopali caste wear earrings in their ears, rings on their fingers, gold chains on their necks, watches on their hands, etc. In the Gopali society, there is a tradition of entertaining by bhajan kirtan (hymn) and nagagan. Lakhe Naach is

very popular in this society and Damfa Bhajan (a kind of hymn) is also a prominent song. Bansuri, Dholak, Susirbaja, Muhali, Sahanai, Narsingh, Gujarati Baja, Nagra, Damru, Khaizdi, Damaha, Jhyali etc. are popular instruments in Gopali caste society (Gopali, S. personal communication, 2024, May 2). It is found that people of the Gopali caste are gradually becoming conscious about health and cleanliness. At present, the social and cultural spheres of the Gopali caste are being influenced by people of other castes and other societies. Due to this, some distortions have started to appear in their original culture.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The Gopali caste, historically engaged in animal husbandry since the early stages of civilization, has not yet fully integrated into modern society. They prefer to live in traditional Gujumujja houses, establish separate tolls (small communities) exclusively for the Gopali people, and maintain their unique social and ritual practices. It is believed that the Gopalis migrated to Nepal from the Mathura region of India during the ancient nomadic era, ruling parts of Nepal for about 500 years, approximately 3,500 years ago. Today, the Gopali people are predominantly found in the southwestern region of the Kathmandu Valley, including areas like Thankot, Matatirtha, Machhegaon, Tistung, Palung, and various wards of Thaha Municipality in the Makwanpur district. Apart from a few exceptions, Gopali settlements are limited to just two of Nepal's 77 districts, with no significant presence elsewhere in the country.

The Gopalis are an indigenous tribe of Nepal with a distinct culture and set of social rules. Although they are descendants of ancient Nepalese rulers, they no longer hold any governmental authority. Traditionally, the Gopalis were engaged in cow breeding, but today, many have moved away from this ancestral occupation. Modern Gopalis earn their livelihoods through various means, including employment, business, agriculture, and foreign labor. However, they have limited opportunities to participate in Nepal's administrative, political, and policy-making processes.

Compared to other castes, the Gopalis lag behind in education and public awareness. Despite their unique language and customs, the Gopalis are categorized under the Newar community in Nepal's census, which obscures their distinct identity. To preserve their heritage, the Nepalese government must recognize the Gopalis as a separate ethnic group. Their unique way of celebrating festivals, conducting rituals from birth to death, avoiding certain marriage customs of the Newar community, and maintaining original traditions in clothing, jewellery, and the Guthi system highlight the need for a comprehensive study of the Gopali caste."

#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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