

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED QUARTERLY INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0302-9298

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 35, No. 1 (January-March), 2026]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/CSS.2026.03.31.55>

Unmasking Hegemony: Interrogating Power and Inequality in Ancient Nepalese Oligarchic Republics

*Peshal Kumar Niraula*¹ & *Neel Kumar Chetri*²

¹Lecturer, CNAS, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu (Nepal)
E-mail:<pesaln90@gmail.com>

²Research Scholar, CNAS, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu (Nepal)
E-mail:<neelchetri@gmail.com>

Abstract

This paper examines the democratic facade of ancient Nepalese oligarchic republics, revealing entrenched socio-economic discrimination and hegemonic control by political elites, landlords, and priests. It highlights the systematic relegation of peasants and artisans to slave status and exploitation of the people for tax extraction. The objective is to critically analyze the economic system, class relations, and ideological mechanisms that sustained inequality within these early republican forms of governance. The research employs a textual analytical approach, drawing from Buddhist Pali texts and Sanskrit religious texts, which are contextualized with historical and archaeological evidence. The findings reveal that while ganarajyas are often praised for their democratic practices, they were fundamentally oligarchic, perpetuating social hierarchies through religious and cultural ideologies that justified the dominance of political elites, and priests. This study offers a nuanced understanding of ancient Nepali governance, highlighting the complex interplay between socio-economic framework and political power. It would encourage the scholars to investigate the issue from different perspectives to unravel the characteristics of the socio-political formation in Ancient Nepal.

Keywords

Republic, Ganarajya, Class, Caste, Raja, Buddha, Tax, People.

Research Foundation International, New Delhi
(Affiliated to UNO)

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)
Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

Unmasking Hegemony: Interrogating Power and Inequality in Ancient Nepalese Oligarchic Republics

1. Introduction

Nepal's current parliamentary democracy is derived from the British Westminster system. Yet, beneath this veneer lies its diverse historical governance models, notably the ancient *ganarajyas*. During the times of Gautama Buddha (566 - 486 BC), these *ganarajyas*, namely the Sakya of Kapilvastu, the Koliya of Ramagrama, the Malla of Pava and Kusinara, and the Videha of Mithila operated within the framework of the Vajji Sangha, a confederation comprising eight clans. Among these were the illustrious Licchavis of Vaishali, the Moriya of Pipalivana, the Bulli of Allakapa, and the Vagga of Sumsumagiri in Indian plains, each contributing to the rich tapestry of the confederation's governance model (Jayaswal, 1943: 44-45).

Besides, the *ganarajyas*, there was a Chedi kingdom in western Nepal centered in the Mahakali region that extended to Kartrapur or Garhwal (Nautiyal, 1969: 20-30). The Buddhist Pali text, Angutara Nikaya includes the Vajji Sangha in the list of Solasa Mahajanapada or sixteen powerful states existing during the lifetime of Buddha. These states were Kasi, Kosala, Anga, Magadha, Vajji Sangha or Vriji, Malla of Punjab, Chedi, Vamsa or Vatsya, Kuru, Panchala, Machha or Matsya, Surasena, Asamaka, Avanti, Gandhara, and Kamboja (Raychaudhari, 1927: 59).

The Kirata Mundhum mentions that the territory of Nepal during the ancient Kirata period extended from River Tista in the east to Kinner Kirat (Garhwal) in the west, and from the snowlines in the north to Ganga River in the south (Chemjong, 2003: 5-7, 104, 108-114). In the Mundhum, the country is called Nepal, and Kathmandu valley is mentioned as Senjelungma (Chemjong, 2003: 89). However, this state centering on Kathmandu valley is not mentioned in the list of Solasa Mahajanapada as it had become weak in the sixth century BC. Kumar Pradhan says that the Khasa state also existed during this period in Humla- upper Karnali region based on oral narratives of the Khasas (Pradhan, 1991: 33). These narratives enrich our understanding of the region's complex political landscape.

Existing studies on *ganarajyas* by the scholars such as K. P. Jayaswal (1943), B. C. Law (1924), Ram Sharan Sharma (2005), Karam Tej Sarao (2013), T. W. Rhys Davids (1911), and R. C. Majumdar (1922), etc, either idealize and glorify the republican system or criticize these republics for being oligarchic and discriminatory towards lower classes. One sees the limited exploration of their economic foundations, mechanisms of exclusion, and the role of ideology in maintaining power system. Addressing these gaps would offer a more nuanced understanding of ancient Nepali republican system, and its implications for contemporary socio-political discourse.

This paper deals with these objectives: to analyze the dialectical relation between the socio-economic framework, and the *ganarajyas*, and to investigate the mechanisms of social exclusion and inequality in context of religious ideology in legitimizing the political power system. It seeks to explore these research questions: what were the dominant modes of production and class dynamics in ancient Nepali *ganarajyas*, and how did they shape political governance? How did the religious ideologies justify the authority of political elites, and priests in ancient Nepalese society, and what were the implications of social inequality and exclusion for the *ganarajyas*?

2. Methodology

This study adopts a textual analytical approach, utilizing Buddhist Pali and Sanskrit religious texts to investigate the socio-political dynamics of ancient Nepali *ganarajyas*. The selected texts include Buddhist Pali scriptures of the first century BC, such as the Digha Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta Nipata, and Anguttara Nikaya, offering insights into the social, economic, and governance practices during Gautama Buddha's era. Additionally, Sanskrit religious texts like the Vedas, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Vasistha dharma sutra, Astadhyayi of Panini, Kautilya's Arthashastra, and the Santi parva of Mahabharata provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political, economic, and ideological context of ancient *ganarajyas*. The Kirata Mundhum—the oral text of the Kiratas as translated and interpreted by Iman Singh Chemjong is also used as it provides important information about Chumlung or assembly during the Kirata rule in ancient Nepal.

The information extracted from these texts is analyzed to discern patterns in governance system, class relations, economic system, and ideological underpinnings within *ganarajya* societies. To enrich this analysis, the textual insights are contextualized within the broader

historical and archaeological evidence available for ancient Nepalese societies. This interdisciplinary approach fosters a holistic understanding of the socio-political landscape, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of textual passages and their implications for ancient Nepalese governance and society. This study aims to uncover the intricate socio-political dynamics of ancient Nepalese *ganarajyas*, shedding light on their governance practices, economic organization, and ideological frameworks. The synthesis of findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of ancient Nepalese society and its implications for contemporary socio-political discourse.

3. Etymology and Genesis

The earliest reference to *ganarajya* is found in Rigveda (3500-3000 BC), where the term *gana* is used forty six times for the republic. The *ganas* are mentioned as the children of Rudra, and their *sabha* is compared with that of *devata* gods (Rigveda 5: 61.13). During the battle, all the male citizens of *gana* fought against the enemies (Rigveda 5: 79.5). The Sukla Yajurveda of eighth century BC, contains directives suggesting governance presided by a dutiful king, where representatives of the people are expected to gather suggestions from the populace and govern for their welfare (Sukla Yajurveda 5: 24, 9: 40, 10.18).

The word “*ganarajya*” derives from “*gana*”, which means, “to count” or “group”, indicating the numerical aspect or assembly of people. Similarly, “*jana*” refers to “people”, highlighting the collective populace. Both “*gana*” and “*jana*” signify the importance of the community and its representation in governance system. In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, *gana* and *sangha* are used for Malla and Vajji *Sangha* (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1: 4. 5. 35). Here, *sangha* denotes the federation or confederation of states, while *gana* means the government (Jayaswal, 1943: 24-26).

In ancient Vedic times, there were diverse tribal groups with economic endeavours such as agriculture and trade frequently falling under the sway or exploitation of warrior clans. These clans would assert dominance over resources and territories, thereby laying the groundwork for the emergence of kingdoms, and *ganarajyas*. Panini, in his *Astadhyayi* of fourth century BC, views that all the *janapadas* or communities were ruled by the warrior clans, some of whom were subject to the king, while others were governed in a republican manner (Agrawal, 1953: 426-428). It is the surplus production that facilitates the emergence of professional groups who abstain from direct food

production, thereby paving the way for the establishment of states (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 8).

The Agganna sutta of the Digha Nikaya (Digha Nikaya 27: 18-21) shed light on the repercussions of the emergence of private property such as rice fields, notably resulting in a surge of crimes such as theft and robbery, among other societal challenges. In response, a social compact was forged between the populace and the warrior class (Kshatriya), wherein a share of rice was pledged as tax to the Raja in exchange for the safeguarding of both people and property. This narrative underscores the foundational purpose of state, namely the preservation of private property.

The four ganarajyas of Nepal thrived during the era of the Northern Black Polished Ware culture (NBPW). Archaeological excavations conducted in Kapilvastu, and Lumbini provide evidence that this culture emerged in the Tarai around the 8th century BC, mirroring its development in various northern Indian territories (Strikland *et al.*, 2016: 10). The Videha ganarajya appears to have been established considerably earlier, during the era of the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) culture, which spanned from around 1500 BC to 800 BC, preceded the advent of the NBPW culture (Vikram *et al.*, 2015: 1301).

The utilization of iron for warfare emerged around 1000 BC, yet its application in agriculture was not evident until later, with the earliest reference to iron as “shyama ayas” or black metal found in the Atharva Veda, composed around 800 BC (Atharva Veda 9: 5.4, 11: 3. 1.7). In the PWG culture, wooden ploughs were crafted from khadira, identified as *Acacia catechu* Willd, while copper implements remained integral to agricultural practices (Sharma, 1983: 60). Videha ganarajya, as referenced in the Sukla Yajurveda, encompassed the Maithili-speaking regions of northeast Bihar and eastern Nepal Tarai, with its epicenter at Janakpur (Chakravarti, 2001: 207). The Sukla Yajurveda of the eighth century BC, mentions that the Sadanira (Rapti River) delineated Videha from the Kosala kingdom to the south (Raychaudhari, 1927: 52-53). Yagyavalkya Rishi, in his Satapatha Brahmana, recounts the founding of Videha by King Videgha Mathava, who migrated with his people from the banks of the Saraswati River. Alongside them, a significant number of Brahmanas also settled in the region. Upon encountering a forest with marshy terrain, they cleared the land using agni (fire), and laid the foundation of Videha (Chakravarti, 2001: 54-55).

The Harappan site of Kalibangan (which developed in 2900 BC in Rajasthan) now occupies the area where the ancient Saraswati River flowed in the Vedic times. Flowing down from the Siwalik range, the

Saraswati River once intertwined with the Sutlej River; however, in about 1900 BC, a seismic event in the Himalayan region obstructed the path of river. The Sutlej River also changed its course to merge with the Indus River (Lal, 2005: 59). Consequently, the Ishkvaku inhabitants of Kalibangan were compelled to forsake their city due to dwindling water resources. In their quest for new fertile lands, they found themselves locked in fierce conflict with the Puru and Bharata tribes of Somavamsis, a saga chronicled in the Rigveda. The Purus defeated the ten thousand strong army of the Ishkvakus on the banks of Amsumati (Yamuna) River (Rigveda 8: 96.13-15).

Consequently, their migratory path led them eastward, ultimately settling in the regions of northwest Bihar and Avadh (Kosala) in Uttar Pradesh, under the guidance of their revered Rishi Vasistha. Advancing from the Vaishali region, they boldly invaded the Kirata territory of Nepal Tarai, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the Videha Ganarajya (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 46). Iman Singh Chemjong posits that when the Aryans encountered the Kiratas led by King Samba, they dubbed them as Ashur (Chemjong, 2003: 5). In the Rigveda, we discern the reverberations of conflict between the Kiratas and Ishkvakus. Vasistha Rishi prays to Vishnu and Indra to vanquish the flat-nosed Rakshasas-devotees of Sishna deva (Shivalinga), and Usha (Parvati) (Rigveda 7:21.5, 10:22.8). Indra triumphs over Susna, breaking the fortifications and seizing the territory of Sambara, the sovereign of the flat-nosed Rakshasas dwelling in the hills (Rigveda 4:30.10, 13-14). Susna, the military commander of Nepal was stationed in a fort within the Janakpur region, while Sambara, referred to in Kirat Mundhum as Samba, and identified in the Gopalaraj Vamshavali of the fourteenth century AD as Sri Samba, stands as the thirteenth Kirata king (Bajracharya & Malla, 1985: 121).

According to the Kirata Mundhum, the Kiratas had governed the Ganga plains for twelve successive generations, during which their formidable tribe known as the Yakkha (Dewans of eastern Nepal) dominated that region (Chemjong, 2003: 17). This fertile region including the Tarai was conquered by the Ishkvaku clans establishing the Videha ganarajya, and the kingdoms of Kasi and Kosala during the PWG culture (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 39).

Despite the conquered territories being cleared by fire, the Tarai region retained vast expanses of towering trees, necessitating the use of iron tools such as axes and hoes to clear the burnt remnants with their roots intact. However, such tools were notably absent in the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) culture, hampering the expansion of

cultivated land (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 37). Consequently, economic development was primarily concentrated in and around Janakpur, while much of the region was filled with rural settlements.

The Videha rulers levied taxes amounting to one twelfth and one tenth of grains, fruits, vegetables, and animals, etc, in kind (Sharma, 1983: 76-77). Artisans received food grains in exchange for their services from the warriors, and peasants. Tax revenues collected by the Videha warriors were distributed among themselves, with the Raja and high-ranking members of Sabha – assembly claiming the lion's share. Brahmanas within their ranks also received a portion through dana (charitable giving) and dakshina (ritual offerings) (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 37). Such system is depicted by Yagyavalkya Rishi, the guru of Raja Janaka in his Satapatha Brahmana when he compares the state with man eating food, and the deer consuming barley (Sharma, 1983: 76). This was the beginning of systematic exploitation in ancient Nepal.

During the eighth century BC, in the NBPW culture, the other Ishkvaku clans conquered the other parts of Tarai and inner Tarai regions, there by establishing the three ganarajyas. (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 46). Among these ganarajyas, the Malla ganarajya was the largest located at the junction of eastern Rapti with Gandak (Raychaudhari, 1927: 79) that included Chitwan extending to Gorkhpur and Champaran in the east. The Rohini River divided the Sakya of Kapilvastu from that of the Koliya of Ramagrama (Parasi) and Devdaha (Rupandehi). Janakpur, the capital of Videha was prosperous and center of Vedic education. However, in the sixth century BC, Videha was weakened by an attack from Kasi, prompting it to join the Vajji Sangha to protect itself from other southern powers like the Kosala kingdom (Raychaudhari, 1927: 84).

Owing to their strategic positioning, these ganarajyas exerted control over vital trade routes connecting the southern plains with the northern hills. The trade route from the Malla city of Champaran traversed towards the Ganga River. To the southwest of these ganarajyas lay the Kosala kingdom, with its capital Sravasti strategically positioned along the trade route linking the north and south. In the southeast, the Magadha kingdom further accentuated the significance of these ganarajyas as key players in regional trade dynamics.

4. Socio-economic Framework

The NBPW culture was marked by expansion of agriculture that led to increased surplus production. The NBPW culture was primarily

an urban-centric culture, with rice, millet, and bajra serving as the main diet characterized by the extensive use of iron (Samuel, 2008: 50-51). The *Astadhyayi* of Panini and Pali Buddhist texts compiled in first century BC, note the use of iron implements mainly iron ploughshare, hoe and sickle in agriculture, with the peasant referred to as *Kaudalika*, one who tills the land. The principal crops mentioned in these texts are mustard, sugarcane, and paddy (Agrawal, 1953: 224; Sharma, 1983: 93). Iron was brought by traders from northern hills, *Singhbhum* (Jharkhand), and *Mayurbhanj* (Odisha) (Sharma, 1983: 95-96).

Owing to the private property rights enforced by the state, society became stratified into distinct classes, as depicted in the *Sutta Nipata*, which mentions landlords, priests, traders, and *Shudras* or *dasakarmakaras*-domestic servants, artisans, and peasants (*Sutta Nipata* 1: 2, 5, 3: 4, 8-9). It also mentions *Brahmanas*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, *Shudras*, *Chandala* and *Pukkasa* (*Sutta Nipata* 3: 25; 7: 7). The Pali texts, mention only one *Gahapati* for a village or locality indicating that they were landlords and wealthy traders (Jaiswal, 1992: 92). The *dasakarmakaras* were fed, paid in cash and kind by the *gahapatis* (Mandal, 2000: 94). The duty of the *Shudras* was to serve the higher castes (*Vasistha* 2: 19-20). Below them were the untouchables called the *Chandalas* and *Nishadas*. A *Chandala* was the child of *Shudra* and *Brahmana* woman (*Vasistha* 18: 1). Similarly, the child of *Brahmana* and *Shudra* woman was the *Nishada*, who was impure like a corpse (*Vasistha* 18: 8-11). A *Brahmana* sitting with these untouchables, and having marriage relations with them became an untouchable (*Vasistha* 1: 22).

In the *Balapandita* sutta of *Majjhima Nikaya*, Buddha says that the sinful persons are reborn as *Chandala* (executioners), *Nishada* (hunters, butchers and fishermen), *Vena* (bamboo workers), *Rathakara* (chariot makers), or *Pukasa* (sanitation workers). He says that these lower castes are poor, they do bad things through speech, mind and body; so, they are destined for hell. Whereas, the *Brahmanas*, *Kshatriyas* and *Gahapati* are beautiful and prosperous, they go to heaven after their death (*Majjhima Nikaya* 129). The *Esukari Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* states that profession was assigned by the caste, and that a person was restricted from adopting the profession of another caste (*Majjhima Nikaya* 96). Such narratives illustrate how an ideological construct of caste was used to maintain the dominance of ruling elite, and justify the unequal distribution of resources and power in the society.

In the Sutta Nipata, wealth is described in terms of sons, irrigated land, and commodities like money (Sharma, 1983: 108). Vasistha identifies documents, witnesses, and land ownership as proofs of property, while categorizing house, land, and money as forms of wealth (Vasistha 16: 10, 13, 16). He says that the moneylender can charge five mashas (copper coins) per month for a loan of 20 karsapanas (silver coins) as an interest (Vasistha 2: 51). Merchants, traders and artisans were organized into guilds-Sreni, which elected the headmen called Shresthis. The Sakyas had a famous Sreni of weavers in a town called Khomadusa that made shawls (Law, 1924: 178). The Shresthis were the financiers and rich moneylenders taking advantage from the trade between northern hills and southern plains (Kosambi, 1970: 100).

Buddha's philosophical journey unfolded in the kingdoms of Magadha, Kosala, and Kusinara of the Malla ganarajya, interconnected by vibrant trade routes. Panini sheds light on the vital northern route, threading through Vaishali, Rajgraha (the capital of Magadha), Sravasti, Kapilvastu, and Taxila in the northwest (Panini 5: 1.77). He mentions that the traders relied on goats and sheep in the northern hills to transport their goods following this same route reaching Suvarnabhumi, where the path narrowed to the extent that only one person could traverse it at a time (Panini 5: 3. 100). Suvarnabhumi was the Karnali region in the Chedi kingdom of western Nepal.

Panini mentions the use of copper, gold and silver coins for trade (Panini 5: 1.37) but usually people resorted to barter system for daily needs (Panini 5: 2. 47). From Tilaurakot, a ceramic pot full of 497 punch marked silver coins (Coningham *et al.*, 2018: 19), copper coins and four-spoked wheel coins have been excavated indicating systematic trade and commerce (Coningham *et al.*, 2018: 22).

In two copper coins, there are elephants, and Indra-dhvaja and swastika, while the reverse of these coins show three hills with crescent and tree (Coningham *et al.*, 2018: 23). Crescent, tree and swastika show that these coins were from Chedi kingdom of western Nepal as the Chedis were Somavamsi Kshatriyas. Their coins have also been excavated from Kumoan belonging to second century BC (Nautiyal, 1969: 20-30). The circular and square shaped four wheel spoked coins were issued by the Sakyas of Kapilvastu (Coningham *et al.*, 2018: 24). The four spoked wheel symbol is also inscribed on pots and other objects suggesting it was an important symbol for Kapilvastu (Coningham *et al.*, 2018: 22). The four-spoked wheel represents the chariot- the war machine of the Ikshvakus that seems to be the symbol of their power.

5. Taxation and Army

In the history of socio-political formation or state, both taxation and the military were vital to its existence for taxes formed the basis of the treasury while the army was created, and maintained through the treasury. Hence, understanding the ganarajya's taxation system is essential for grasping its governance system. The Ishkvaku tribe, comprising Brahmanas and Kshatriyas, were exempt from state taxes owing to their virtue of conquest. The Pali texts inform that the Brahmana and Ksatriya landlords had to give only occasional gifts to the Rajas (Sharma, 2005: 213). Contrary to this, the Vaishyas and Shudras are identified as tax payers in the Pali texts (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 92-93).

In the Samannaphala Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, the Buddha identifies peasants and artisans as the primary producers of wealth, responsible for producing food, and crafting commodities (Digha Nikaya 4. 2). He also says that their capacity to pay taxes is a fruit of wealth (Malalsekera, 1960: 70). The state functioned as the tax-collecting mechanism, ostensibly under the guise of protecting the people; it did not have the obligation to work for people's welfare in return for taxes collected. Vasistha says that if the Raja follows his legal codes then he can take one sixth of the wealth from the people as tax (Vasistha 1: 41-42). He says that the people pay taxes as they are protected by the rulers (Vasistha 2: 17).

Tax collection necessitated the surveying and measurement of cultivable land, a process overseen by officers known as kshetrakars, as mentioned by Panini. These officers were responsible for categorizing lands based on their respective areas (Agrawal, 1953: 143, 197). He says that the peasants paid two to three silver coins annually on one plough. They also had to pay house tax, and taxes on keeping grinder and husk lever (Agrawal, 1953: 414-415). The Vasistha dharmasutra sanctions one-sixth of the wealth as tax, but the Agganna sutta does not mention the rate of taxation. It indicates that taxes were collected according to the decision of Sabha or assembly of the ganarajya.

The tax collector was called Balipati gahaka in the Pali texts. Panini also informs that the usual tax collector was the Karkara collecting taxes every year (Agrawal, 1953: 415). The Pali texts mention the special officers called Akasiya and Tundiya who collected additional taxes during the times of crisis, and depending on the need of the ruling elite (Sharma, 2005: 211). There were officers called Rajbhat who worked in executive, judiciary and military departments

(Raychaudhari, 1927: 184). The money collected from taxation was used to maintain the army, and bureaucracy; apart from donations to Brahman priests and Buddhist monks.

Buddha Ghosha, in his commentary of Digha Nikaya, says that Gautama Buddha had eighty thousand Sakya families as his relatives, and about the same number of his mother's Koliya families (Law, 2008: 110). Assuming that if at least one physically fit Kshatriya was recruited into the army then we get about eighty thousand soldiers in a ganarajya. This shows that the large army consumed a large part of state treasury; so, the state did not engage in welfare activities for the common people.

6. Sabha and Samiti

The Sabha and Samiti were the main two props of the socio-political system of the ganarajyas. In the Rigveda, the term Sabha is mentioned eight times, which was a tribal assembly in a hall or conclave. Women were also allowed to become sabhavati or members of Sabha (Rigveda 1: 167.3). Those nobles riding horses, and chariots who received taxes attended the Sabha (Rigveda 8: 4.9). Similarly, the Atharvaveda mentions the Rajas attending the Sabha (Atharvaveda 19: 57.2). The Rajas in the Sabha elected a king or Maharaja who presided over the Sabha. He implemented the decisions taken by the Sabha. The Sabha performed political, administrative and judicial functions (Rigveda 6: 28.6; 10: 71.10).

The Samiti occurs six times in the Rigveda, and four times in the Atharvaveda. All the people could attend the Samiti as it was the general assembly. Such assemblies elected the headmen called gramani in different regions. The scholars or Rishi-Munis also had their own Samiti (Sharma, 2005: 112), which was also known as Parishad. The Samiti elected the Rajas who formed the Sabha (Rigveda 10: 166.4; Atharvaveda 3: 4.2). Thus, during the Vedic age, there was a fledgling democracy in South Asia or Bharatvarsha. However, by the sixth century BC, owing to the caste divisions as enforced by the Ishkvaku rulers, the Samiti lost the right of electing the Rajas, and the Sabha became the assembly of the elite landlords where women could not become its members (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 99).

When the Ishkvakus conquered the Ganga plains including the Nepal Tarai, they encountered the Kiratas who had their assemblies called Chumlung at the local level, while there was a king at the top. The Kirata Mundhum informs that it was God Ningwaphuma, who established the practice of convening venerable elders to deliberate

and make decisions within the Chumlung, or the house of collective opinion, whose verdict was higher than that of the views and superstitious beliefs of the people (Chemjong, 2003: 34, 41-42). When the Sabha of the Ishkvakus was superimposed on the Chumlung, the model for ganarajya was created, and the Chumlung came to be known as Samiti. Kautilya says that the Licchavis, Malla, and Vajjis or Vrijikas lived by the title of Raja, and in their territories, there were highborn and lowborn people (Shamasastri, 1951: 407).

The Ishkvakus termed the Kirata traders, and merchants as Vaishyas, and the peasants and artisans as Shudras. The Chandalas and Nishadas were the descendants of Brahmanas and Shudras as mentioned above. The Chumlung came to be divided on caste lines such as the peasants had their Samiti under elected gramani, while the artisans and traders had Sreni under elected Shresthis. The Pali texts mention that the Brahmana and Sramana or Rishi-Munis and Buddhist monks had their Samiti or Sangha. Gautama Buddha and Makhali Ghosala had their Sanghas, whose heads were called ganino (Bhandarkar, 1919: 142-145). The Samiti and Sreni were the local self-governing units in the ganarajyas. These Samiti and Sreni used to construct buildings for their meetings, rest houses, and water tanks. Women could also speak in these Samiti and Sreni. Similarly, it was their responsibility to create parks, and roads in between villages (Davids, 1911: 49).

In the Anguttara Nikaya (3: 76), Buddha calls the heads of Samiti as Gana Jethaka, and the Kshatriya Rajas of Sabha as Adhipatyam Karanti (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 60). In Ambattha sutta, Buddha says that the son born from Brahmana and Kshatriya woman, and vice versa are regarded as Kshatriyas but they cannot become a Raja; only a pure blooded Kshatriya can become a Raja (Digha Nikaya 3: 3). Panini says that there were two competing groups in the Sabha (Panini 8: 1: 15). The Santi Parva of Mahabharata dating to fourth century AD informs us that in ganarajyas two, three or five influential Sabha members advised the Gana (government), and Samiti (Santi Parva 107: 23-25). This indicates that the king was chosen from among such few influential members of the Sabha. From among these members, the king, deputy king, Army chief, and finance minister were chosen (Jayaswal, 1943: 47). In Vinaya Pitaka, Amatya is mentioned indicating the Sabha members who elected the king, and they were also high ranking judicial officers (Raychaudhari, 1927: 155, 184).

We do not know how many members were in Sabha but the Mahavastu and Lalitvistara sutra dating to about fourth century AD

mentions that the Sakyas had five hundred members in their Sabha (Law, 1924: 193). The father of Gautama Buddha was the king of Sakyas, and after him, Buddha's cousin Bhaddiya was elected as the king. The Sabha building of the Sakyas was known as Santagar (Law, 1924: 194). Similarly, the Malla ganarajya had its Sabha building in Pava called Ubhataka (Law, 1924: 150). Matpatra or voting ballots of Sabha members were made of colorful leaves for taking decisions. Defying the Sabha's decisions carried dire consequences: death, state confiscation of property, or a life as a Parivrajaka (wandering ascetic) (Ambedkar, 1957: 27-28). The early life of Buddha, recounted in Pali texts, exemplifies these punishments, underscoring the Sabha's formidable authority.

Siddhartha, son of King Suddhodana, served as both a Sabha member and an army officer of the Sakya ganarajya. When he was twenty-nine years old, a dispute arose between the Sakya and Koliya ganarajya over the sharing of water from the Rohini River for irrigation. The army chief proposed for a military confrontation with the Koliyas, but Siddhartha proposed resolving the issue through diplomatic negotiations (Ambedkar, 1957: 24-25). Nevertheless, the Sabha voted in favour of battle, with Siddhartha in the minority. Choosing not to participate in the impending battle, Siddhartha opted to renounce his position and status, deciding to become a Parivrajaka (Sanyasi) as a punishment (Ambedkar, 1957: 27-28). He left Kapilavastu, and crossing the Ganga River, he entered Rajgriha, the capital of Magadha, marking the commencement of his philosophical journey (Ambedkar, 1957: 45).

At the top level, there was a Sanghiya Parishad or assembly of the Vajji Sangha representing all the eight ganarajyas of the Ishkvaku tribe, whose work was to discuss the security of the ganarajyas. It had eighteen members, nine each from Licchavi and Malla ganarajyas having equal number of votes. The other small ganarajyas had to abide by its decision (Jayaswal, 1943: 50).

7. Conclusion

The development of socio-political systems in the Ganga plains and Nepal Tarai unveils a complex interplay of class dynamics and power relations. The hegemony of ruling elite solidified as the caste divisions enforced by Ishkvaku rulers relegated the peasants and workers to the slave status. This gradually eroded the egalitarian foundations of these assemblies, where class interests superseded the democratic ideals. We do not have archives to show organized revolts of the peasants and workers against their systematic exploitation as

their divisions into castes prevented the rise of class-consciousness among them. The Dasakarmakaras were considered as the natural property of the rulers as mentioned in the Pali texts (Chanana, 1960: 39). In such texts we find the Dasakarmakaras resisting their masters by slowing down work and by neglecting the work (Chanana, 1960: 56-57). Buddha only suggests that they should obey their masters, and the masters should take care of them (Chanana, 1960: 61). The European slaves in ancient Greece worked through the threat of prison, and whip. However, the Dasakarmakaras in the ganarajyas worked under the caste system sanctioned by religion.

The Sakya ganarajya was conquered by Vidudhaba, the king of Kosala during the lifetime of Buddha (Sharma, 1968: 207-217). Similarly, the Vajji Sangha led by the Licchavis of Vaishali was defeated by Ajatashatru, the king of Magadha in about 481-480 BC (Jain, 1991: 75). The Kirata Mundhum informs that the Licchavis subsequently invaded and captured the Simangarh (Simruangarh)-the Mithila region where there was Videha ganarajya. Then they built twelve forts in the region, which they called Baragarhi (Chemjong, 2003: 17). Then they conquered east and western region, gradually, from the Tarai region, they entered Gorkarna in Kathmandu valley, and defeated the Kirata king, Gasti. They commenced their rule in Nepal (Chemjong, 2003: 16-17). The Malla ganarajya was the last ganarajya to be conquered by the Licchavis. The Changu Narayan inscription (464 AD) of Manadeva mentions the conquest of Mallapuri, and the rulers of east and west by him (Niraula & Chetri, 2080: 177). Sudarsan Raj Tiwari writes that Manadeva attacked the Mallapuri by crossing the Trisuli River approaching it from Sitapaila (Tiwari, 2001: 37). Manadeva seems to have defeated the city of Mallas in the Chitwan area. Thus, the republican tradition of Nepal ended through the establishment of the Licchavi rule in Nepal, who adopted the tradition of monarchy from the Kiratas.

The entrenched socio-economic discrimination in the ancient Nepalese ganarajyas served to perpetuate the power and dominance of the ruling elites, landlords, and priests, who exploited the labour of peasants and artisans to maintain their wealth and control. This exploitation created deep class divisions and social instability, as the oppressed classes were systematically marginalized, and deprived of economic and social opportunities. The Vasistha Dharmasutra's promotion of private property played a critical role in entrenching the caste system by reinforcing economic hierarchies, facilitating exploitation, and perpetuating social inequality. The ideological use of

such religious texts to justify and maintain the social hierarchy further reinforced the hegemonic framework, preventing any meaningful challenge to the status quo and perpetuating a legacy of inequality and oppression.

The ancient ganarajyas underscore the historical patterns of power and wealth concentration among elites, reflecting similar dynamics in contemporary Nepal's reliance on remittances and privatized services. The privatization of health and education perpetuates socio-economic inequalities, much like the exploitation seen in the ganarajyas, benefitting the upper classes while marginalizing the poor. By ignoring indigenous knowledge systems such as the Vaisesik Sutra of Kashyap Rishi, and Rigveda, Nepal risks reinforcing neo-colonial dependencies on Western liberal thought, which may not fully address the unique Nepalese socio-political realities. Recognizing the historical struggle against elite domination in the ganarajyas can inspire modern democratic efforts to challenge economic disparities and promote governance that is more equitable. Hence, the history of these ancient republics offers critical lessons for modern Nepal. By drawing from local histories and traditions, Nepal can work toward a more inclusive democratic system that genuinely addresses the needs of all its citizens, rather than perpetuating the concentration of power and wealth among a few.

References

- Mandal, K. K., "THE NATURE OF AGRARIAN LABOUR IN EARLY HISTORIC INDIA (c.600 B.C. to 300 B.C.)", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 61, Part One: Millennium, 2000.
- Agrawal, V. S., *India as known to Panini*, Lucknow: University of Lucknow, 1953.
- Ambedkar, B. R., *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Bombay: People's Education Society, 1957.
- Bajracharya, D., & Malla, Kamal. P., *The Gopalaraj Vamshavali*, Nepal Research Center, Tribhuvan University Press, 1985.
- Bhandarkar, D. R., *Lectures on the Ancient History of India: On the Period from 650-325 BC*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1919.
- Bodhi, B., *The Middle length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majhima Nikaya*, Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 1995.
- Buhler, G., *The Sacred Laws of the Aryas, (Part 2): Vasistha and Baudhayana*, Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1882.
- Chakravarti, Dilip. K., *Archeological geography of the Ganga Plain: The lower and the Middle Ganga*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.
- Chanana, D. R., *Slavery in Ancient India*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House Private Limited, 1960.

- Chemjong, I. S., *HISTORY OF THE KIRAT PEOPLE, Part 1 and 2*, Kirat Nepal: Yakthung Chumlung, 2003.
- Coningham, R. A. E., Acharya, K. P., Manuel, M. J., Davis, C. E., Kunwar, R. B., Simpson, I. A., Lafortune-Bernard, A., Hale, D., Strickland, K. M., Smagur, E., & Tremblay, J., "Archaeological investigations at Tilaurakot-Kapilavastu, 2014-2016", *Ancient Nepal: Journal of the Department of Archeology*, 2018, 197-198.
- Davids, T. W. R., *Buddhist India*, New York: G. P Putnam Sons, 1911.
- Dutt, M. N., *The Mahabharata: Shanti Parva*, H. C. Das, Dutt, M. N., *The Mahabharata: Shanti Parva*, Calcutta: Elysium Press, 1903.
- Griffith, Ralph. T. H., *The hymns of the Rig Veda*, Benares: E.J. Lazarus & Co., 1897.
- Griffith, Ralph. T. H., *The texts of the White Yajur Veda*, Benares: E.J. Lazarus & Co, 1899.
- Griffith, Ralph. T. H., *The Hymns of the Atharva Veda*, (Second edition, Vol. 2), Benares: E.J. Lazarus & Co, 1917.
- Jain, K. C., *Lord Mahavira and his Times*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.
- Jaiswal, S., THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF "GRIHAPATI", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 53, New Delhi: 52nd Session (1991-92), 1992.
- Jayaswal, K. P., *Hindu Polity: A Constitutional history of India in Hindu times*, Bangalore: The Bangalore Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd., 1943.
- Kosambi, D. D., *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Noida, Uttar Pradesh: Vikas Publishing House, Private Ltd., 1970.
- Lal, B. B., "Aryan invasion of India: Perpetuation of a myth", Edwin F. Bryant and Laurie L. Patton (eds.), *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and inference in Indian history*, Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005.
- Law, B. C., *Some Kshatriya tribes of Ancient India*, University of Calcutta, The Baptist Mission Press, 1924.
- Law, B. C., *The Life and Work of Buddha Ghosha*, New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2008.
- Majumdar, R. C., *Corporate Life in Ancient India* (Second Edition), Poona: The Oriental Book Agency, 1922.
- Malalsekera, G. P., *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Pali Text Society, Luzac & Co., 1960.
- Maurice, W., *The long discourses of the Buddha: A translation of Digha Nikaya*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995.
- Nautiyal, K., P., *Archeology of Kumuan* (First Edition), Varanasi: The Chaukhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1969.
- Niraula, P., & Chetri, N. K., *Prachin Nepal ma Ganatantra ko Abhyas* (Man Bahadur BK), Raithaney Silpa kala tatha Sampada Pratisthan Nepal, 2080.
- Norman, K. R., *The Group of Discourses: Sutta Nipata*, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001.
- Pradhan, K., *The Gorkha Conquests: The process and consequences of the unification of Nepal, with particular reference to Eastern Nepal*, Oxford: Oxford University press, 1991.
- Raychaudhari, H., *Political History of Ancient India*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1927.

- Samuel, G., *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic religions to the thirteenth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Sarao, K. T., *Janapadas, Mahajanapadas, Kingdoms, and Republics: Vol. A History of Ancient India, Volume III: The Vedic, Buddhist and Jaina Texts, and Political History and Administration till c.200 BC*, III, (D.K. Chakrabarti and M. Lal), Vivekananda International Foundation and Aryan Books International, 2013.
- Shamasastri, R., *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (Fourth Edition), Mysore: Sri Raghuvveer Printing Press, 1951.
- Sharma, J. P., *Republics in Ancient India, C. 1500 B.C.-500 B.C.*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968.
- Sharma, R. S., *Material culture and Social formation in Ancient India*, Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Pvt. Ltd., 1983.
- Sharma, R. S., *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005.
- Strikeland, K. M., Cunningham, R. A. E., & Others, "Ancient Lumbini: A preliminary report on recent archeological investigations at Lumbini's village mound", *Journal of the Department of Archeology, Ancient Nepal*, 190, 2016, 1-17.
- Tiwari, S. R., *The Ancient Settlements of the Kathmandu Valley*, Kirtipur: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 2001.
- Vikram, B., Srivastav, C., & Others, "On the Botanical findings from excavations at Ahichhatra: A multicultural site in Upper Ganga plain, Uttar Pradesh", *Current Science*, 109(7), 10 October, 2015. ★