

Nepāla: Archaeology of the Word

1. Antiquity of the Word

The word *Nepāla* is obscure in origin. The earliest reliable incidence of the word is in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta (A.D. 335- 375). The undated inscription mentions that among other frontier- kings, the king of Nepāla “paid tribute, obeyed orders, and came to prostrate themselves to satisfy the proud will of the master”. In Nepalese sources, the earliest incidence of the word is in an inscription dated equivalent to A.D. 512. Issued by King Vasantadeva, it is located in Tistung, a small valley at the foot of Candrāgiri, on the ancient entry route to the Nepal Valley. The form used in the inscription is *swasti naipālevyaḥ*, translated by the authorities variously as “(greetings) to Nepalis”, “(greetings) to the residents of Nepal”, “(greetings) to the Nepālas”, and “(greetings) to the leaders/kings of Nepālas”. The form *naipālevyaḥ* is dative plural. *Naipāla* is from *Nepāla*, combined with the suffix- *an*. The vowel *e* in the first syllable *ne* becomes diphthong *ai* when the suffix- *an* is used. Unfortunately, however, the suffix - *an* is used for different shades of meaning, coming for, among other things, attributives (e.g., *saiva* from *Siva*), aggregates (e.g. *bhaikṣm* from *bhikṣu*), and patronymics (e.g. *aupagavaḥ* from *upagu*). It may sometimes bear the sense of ‘king/leader of’ as in *śaibhyaḥ*, “king of *Sibis*”.

Although the exact shade of meaning of the form of address *swasti naipālevyaḥ* is debatable, two facts of its use are in clear evidence. Of the nearly 200 extant ancient Nepalese inscriptions belonging to the 5th to 9th century A. D., the form of address is used in only three inscriptions. Although they are chronologically nearly a century apart, they are all located in the Tistung valley. Two of these, issued 95 years apart, are located exactly in the same find- spot. The total absence of the form of address in the rest of ancient inscriptions, on the one hand, and the evident concentration of it within a limited geographic area, on the other, compels us to reject the translation of *naipālevyaḥ* as “to the Nepalis in general”. It can only mean either “to the Nepāla- s” or “to the leaders/kings of the Nepāla- s”. If this interpretation of epigraphic facts is sound, the word *Nepāla* stood, in the past, for a well- defined and specific social aggregate whose identity was intact till the beginning of the 7th century A.D. The use of the form of address coincides with a phase in ancient Nepalese political history when the ābhiira clan was in evident ascendancy (A.D. 512- 640).

2. The Word Nepāla in Literary Sources

Nepāla is, of course, not a rare word in classical Indian literature. It occurs in an alleged Vedic text, *Atharvaparīśiṣṭa*. It occurs in Kautalya’s *Arthaśāstra*, in Bharata *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in some recensions of the *Mahābhārata*, in the buddhist canonical text, *Mūlasarvāstivāda*

Vinaya, and the Jaina text, *Parīṣiṣṭaparvan*. However, the main problem with these literary sources is that they do not have any firm, reliable, and absolute chronology. For example, some authorities claim that *Arthaśāstra* belongs to the 4th century B.C. while others would not date it earlier than the 4th century A.D.! The critical edition of *Mahābhārata* does not contain any reference to Nepal, but a southern recension does have a reference. Textual studies of these classics have shown that they belong to “evolving anonymous literature” and that there are far too many interpolations and scribal “improvements” for anyone to be able to decide what constituted the “original text”. Thus, although the name *Nepāla* appears in Indian literary sources, most of these are so difficult to date with any exactitude that these sources are not of much use in establishing either the origin or the antiquity of the word.

3. Traditional Interpretations of the Word

In Nepal, there are two kinds of historical writings available in the traditional genre: the medieval *vaṃśāvalīs* (the *Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī*, compiled in ca. 1380s, and its cognates) and the vernacular chronicles (compiled between the 1820s and 1880s). One of the most important differences between the two traditions is that whereas the medieval chronicles are relatively free from mythological digressions and puranic materials, the later chronicles are infested with them. It is interesting to note that the traditional interpretation of the word *Nepāla* is not preserved in any of the three surviving medieval chronicles whereas the later chronicles, both Brahmanical and Buddhist versions, contain interpretations and rationalizations of the word *Nepāla*. In one version, it is said that “the great Rishi, from whom Nepal derives its name, was a devotee named Ne” (Wright, 1877:89). In the same chronicle, we also come across the following story:

The cowherds who came in the train of Lord Krishna) settled down ...and built cowsheds. One of their cows, by name Ne, was a mulch cow, but gave no milk. Every day at a certain time she went running to a certain place. One day the chief cowherd followed her, and saw milk issuing from her udder, and saturating the spot on which she stood. His curiosity was excited to know what was under the spot, and on removing some earth he discovered the light, which however consumed him.

Ne Muni, from whom Nepal derives its name, then came, and having persuaded the people that there would be no Chhetri Rajas in the Kali Yuga, he installed as king the son of the cowherd who had been consumed by the light. (Wright, 1877: 107- 108)

The Buddhist interpretation, however, is quite different. According to a recension, compiled in ca. A.D. 1825, Manjuśrī Bodhisattwa, the divine agent who drained the primordial Lake of Serpents, Nāgahrada, that was the Nepal Valley, persuades the serpent- king Karkoṭaka to stay on in the drained valley :

In order that the city may be well populated, you will have to cause the rains to be set in here always in due season and cherish the people; and the Self- Existent Buddha called Ne, (i.e. the sender to paradise) will also take care and multiply the community. The Valley will be called after his name Nepal or the Cherished of the Adi Buddha. (Hasrat, 1970:7)

In these traditions two elements emerge clearly into relief. The imputed etyma (Ne the sage, Ne the cow, and Ne the sender to paradise) are primarily sectarian in nature, and the interpretations are drawn from a given religious- cultural system so that the name could be, not only interpreted, but also legitimized within the system. The word, thus, becomes not just a linguistic sign, but also a cultural syndrome.

Chronologically, what is of critical interest here is that although the story of mulch cow was not unknown to the medieval chroniclers, Ne Muni or Ne the sender to paradise was not known to them. The compilers of *Gopālarājavanśāvalī* were familiar with the tradition relating to Nepa the cowherd who dug out the Jyotirlinga or the Luminous Phallus of Lord Pasupati. Prior to the late 15th century, Ne Muni did not seem to exist at all. Gajapati, a mediocre Sanskrit playwright, who composed a Sanskrit play called *Caturāṅka Mahābhārata* (preserved in the National Archives, Kathmandu, Catalogue Part I, No. 449), wrote in the preface that “the country protected in the past by Ne Muni is called Nepāla”. This is the only known and reliable ancestry of the sage Ne Muni.

In the Nepal Valley, during the 15th- 16th century there appears to have been an upsurge of religious- cultural nationalism. *Nepāla Mahātmya* (earliest extant copy dated A.D. 1654), *Svayambū Purāṇa* (earliest extant copy dated A.D. 1558), *Paśupati Purāṇa* (earliest extant copy dated A.D. 1504), and similar puranic texts were compiled. This literature appears to have grown, at least in part, out of the cultural need to glorify and legitimize the local shrines, including the rivers and their confluences, by some or other kind of divine association. Initially, the inspiration may have come from the recent migrant religious and cultural elites from India. There is hardly any doubt that sectarian and religious interpretation of the word *Nepāla* was sought during this fertile period of myth- making. Ne the sender to paradise and Ne the sage may have been pious after- thoughts of this phase in Nepal’s cultural history.

4. First Approaches to Secular Analysis

The earliest known secular (i.e. linguistic) attempt to analyze and interpret the word *Nepāla* was made by Christian Lassen (1800- 1876), a Norwegian scholar who spent most of his working life as Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Bonn, Germany. The four volumes of his *Indische Alterthumskunde* (Indian Archaeology), published between 1847- 1861, are regarded by the knowledgeable as “a milestone in the progress of the science of Indology,” and “one of the world’s greatest monuments of untiring industry and critical scholarship”. In volume I fascicle 2, Lassen writes that *Nepāla*, like *Himāla*, *Pāñcāla*, and similar other words, is formed as a compound of *nīpa* and *āla* (standing for *ālaya*, i.e. abode). *Nīpa* is “foot of a mountain”. *Nepāla* thus means “abode at the foot of a mountain” (Lassen 1861:76, footnote no 3). In the meantime, Lassen dismissed Ne Muni as “just a concoction”.

At the beginning of the present century, Sylvain Levi (1863- 1935)- a French savant of great repute and vast erudition in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan languages, published a monumental three- volume study on the history and culture of Nepal : *Le Nepal : Etude Historique d’Un Royaume Hindou* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1905- 1908). He begins his survey of the history of Nepal with a lucid and critical examination of the earliest references to Nepal, both epigraphic and literary, including the legendary interpretations of the word. In this context, Levi also scrutinizes Lassen’s etymological explanation :

Even supposing that the change from *nīpa* to *nepa* were legitimate, the sense attributed here to this word (i.e., foot of a mountain - KPM) would have no other foundation than the gloss of a scholiast (i.e., a 16th century commentator called Mahidhara, in his commentary on *Vājaśaneyi Saṃhitā* - KPM). Moreover, it applies rather badly to a country already situated in the mountains themselves. Nepal strictly speaking is only the large interior valley. The word *nīpa* signifies above all a kind of asoka (the *nauclea cadamba* of the botanist) which is far from being characteristic of the Nepalese region. In addition, one could still bring in the Nīpas, a princely race of the cycle of the Pāṇḍavas, who reigned in Kāmpilya in Pāñcāla. (Levi, 1905 : II : 66)

Not only that Levi found Lassen’s Sanskrit etymology of the word *Nepāla* untenable, he went on to confess :

The name Nepal, *Nepāla*, despite its Sanskrit appearance, does not lend itself to a satisfactory etymological explanation. (Levi, 1905 : II : 66)

Despite his vast Sanskrit learning Levi himself had no definite contribution to make, except a suggestive hint where he said :

Either *newāra* derives its origin from the word *Nepāla*, or that Nepal owes, on the contrary, her name to a Sanskrit adaptation of local ethnic. (Levi, 1905: I: 222-223)

Sir Ralph L. Turner, in his famous *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931) reinstates Levi's suggestion in his entry in the dictionary under the head- word *Nepāla*, where he writes :

Late Sanskrit, *Nepāla* singular, the country; plural, its people; - this may be a sanskritization of *newāra*, or the latter may be a later (Eastern Hindi or Bihari) form of *Nepāla*. (Turner, 1931 : 353)

5. Tibetan Etymology : The Miscarried Attempt

Austin L. Waddell (1893: 292- 294), a British civil servant turned Tibetologist proposed an etymology of the word *Nepāla* based on what he thought were Tibetan data. According to him, the first syllable *ne* (corresponding to the written Tibetan form *gnas*) signifies home, spot, sacred place, or place of pilgrimage. The syllable *pal* would be the equivalent of *bal*, signifying “wool”. *Nepāla* would then signify “the sacred place of the *bal* or wool”. Waddell's monstrous etymological explanation has no basis in facts of the Tibetan language or Tibeto- Burman linguistics. For one thing, the usual word- order is *Bal- po*, *Bal- yul*. So instead of *gnas- bal*, it would ordinarily be *bal- gnas*. Secondly, the Tibetan name for Newars (*Bal- po*) and Nepal (*Bal- yul*), as Tucci has conclusively shown, is due to “curious duplications of place names”. In the A.D. 821 Treaty Inscription at Lhasa, Nepal, is clearly referred to as *ggen lho Bal pho* (Tucci, 1958:344- 347; 397).

6. Indo- Aryan Etymologies : The Topographic Interpretations

Topographic features of Nepal in general and the Nepal Valley in particular have remained the bases of Indo- Aryan interpretations of the word so far. These interpretations have several problems—the problems of imputed meaning as well as the problems of rules of word- formation. Robert Shafer, an American linguist who was basically a Sino- Tibetanist rather than an Indologist, says :

The first part of *Nepāla* is phonetically quite regular as a derivative of *nīpa* (foot of a mountain). Sanskrit *ai*, as a rule, became Prakrit *ai*.

Then Shafer goes on to add:

But I do not believe we can consider *Nepāla* in isolation when discussing the last part of the word. At least some of these final- *la*'s (in *Pāñcāla*, *Nepāla*, *Kośala*, *Baṅgāla* - KPM) found in place names may have been Tibeto- Burmic in origin. (Shafer, 1954 : 137)

Whereas Shafer was bothered by the last part of the word *Nepāla*, offering to explain the word as Indo- Aryan in root and Tibeto- Burman in suffix, a different problem in Indo- Aryan explanation bothered Burton- Page, a British expert on South Asian archaeology. He interprets the word as a derivative of *nīpa* (damp, low- lying), affixed with *ala*, the old Indo- Aryan suffix meaning 'pertaining to, possessing'. This would result in *naipāla*. So he says:

The real difficulty from the Sanskrit viewpoint is the *guṇa*- vowel; the *vṛddhi ai* would be expected in the Sanskrit derivative of *nīpa+āla*.

To get over this difficulty Burton- Page (1954:596) proposes to interpret the word *Nepāla* in a somewhat tortuous way : *Nepāla* is a "re- sanskritisation of Prakrit *nevāla* which is derived from Sanskrit *naipāla* which in turn is a derivative of the root *nīpa* suffixed with *āla*". According to him, the meaning of this compound will be "damp, low- lying home". To call Nepal in general or the Nepal Valley in particular "damp, low- lying home" may be an unsatisfactory metaphor, but not a very apt toponym. We are, therefore, relieved at the fact that Burton- Page concedes that "this is not offered as a conclusive solution". Because, while the interpretation may be sound phonetically, its semantics is questionable.

Recently, Nepali historian D.R. Regmi has come up so late in the day with yet another Indo- Aryan etymology based on topographic semantics. According to Regmi :

Nepāla might have derived its name from *nīpa* (note that the vowel *i* short in Regmi, whereas it has always been long earlier- KPM), meaning as it goes to cause, to imbibe as a verb or a water jar or a lake as a noun. By *vṛddhi* it becomes *Naipa*. *Nīpa* obviously means a tank or a lake in the present context (The settlers) gave it the name according to its potential supporting capacity to be

associated with *pālayati* and lastly the name *Nepāla* came to birth. (Regmi, 1983:1)

A careful perusal of Sanskrit dictionary or dictionaries would immediately expose how disastrous this etymology is. In his dictionary Regmi just looked at the head- word at the top of the column, ignoring the other elements of the compounds. *nīpa* is, of course, a water jar. But it does not mean a lake. The word which stands for “a well, pool, tank, any place or trough for watering cattle”, is not *nīpa*, but *nīpana*. Similarly, *nīpasaras* is “a pool or lake for watering cattle”. How the most unlikely compounding of *naipa+palayati* will result in *Nepāla* by any rule of Sanskrit morphophonemics, unfortunately, the Nepali historian does not care to explain.

7. Sanskritisation

Scholarly Sanskrit dictionaries- the native Indian dictionaries, the great St. Petersburg Dictionary of Bohtlingk and Roth, and Mayerhofer’s recent etymological dictionary- all appear to have maintained a studied but intriguing silence about the origins of the word *Nepāla*. Two of the greatest Indo- Aryanists of the twentieth century, the late Sir Ralph L. Turner of Britain and the late Suniti Kumar Chatterjee of India, have both indicated that the word may have been a sanskritisation of *Newāa*. As we have shown earlier, Levi too hinted at the possibility of the word being a Sanskrit adaptation of de l’ethnique local. Despite his Indo- Aryan leanings, Burton- Page concedes that *Nepāla* is a sanskrit form of *Nevala* (Prakrit). Baburam Acharya, the late Historian- Laureate of Nepal, at first proposed to interpret *Nepāla* as a sanskritisation of a tribal name which he hypothesized as *Nepāra*. Later on he, too, came round to accept that *Nepāla* is a sanskritisation of *Newāra* (Acharya, 1953 and 1972).

Recently, the sanskritisation hypothesis has gained some additional evidence. A great many place- names traced in ancient Nepalese inscriptions- the names of rivers, hillocks, fields, canals, etc., are non- Sanskritic in origins. Recent analyses (Malla, 1981 and 1983) have shown that many of these toponyms and hydronyms are, in fact, Tibeto- Burman in stock. An analysis of ancient river- names and their recent transformations has nearly conclusively established that several names are sanskritisation of Tibeto- Burman words and roots.

Levi, Turner, Chatterjee, Burton- Page, and Acarya are all unanimous on the point that *Nepāla* is a sanskritisation of *Newara*. However, it will be closer to the known linguistic/phonetic facts of the two words (*Nepāla Nebāla Newāla Newāra*) if we consider them as two phonetically variant forms of the same word : *Nepāla* is the learned Sanskrit form whereas *Newara* is the colloquial Prakrit form. The earliest verifiable incidence of

Prakrit form of the word (*naivāla*) is attested in the Gilgit manuscript of the Buddhist canonical text *Mūlasarvāstivāda- vinayavastu* by Jinamitra compiled “after the 3rd century A.D” (Levi. 1907:115). It was translated into Chinese by I- tsing in A.D. 700.

8. Tibeto- Burman Roots ? : An Ethnolinguistic Hypothesis

Classical place- names in South Asia have almost always been the names of the tribes, clans, and peoples who had been inhabiting the place, e.g., Bhārata (from the Bharatas), Pañcāla, Magadha, Videha, Andhra, Aṅga, Vaṅga, Kallīṅga, Matsya, Kuru, Pundra, etc. At least, in one classical Indian text, Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (XIII:32), usually dated back to second century A.D., the people of Nepal (*naipālīka*) is mentioned along with other well- known tribes- Aṅga, Vaṅga, Kālīṅga, Vatsa, Odra, Magadha, Puṇḍra, etc. The epigraphic evidence in Nepal also indicates that the country probably got its name from the people who inhabited it, rather than from any of its isolated topographical feature— real or imagined.

To say that *Nepāla* is a sanskritisation of *Newāra* does not explain much in etymological terms. The crux of the problem is to identify and define, if possible, the semantic primitives, i.e., the basic roots of which the original word is made. Local traditions and interpretations consistently retain a kind of unconscious echo of certain roots: ne, the cow, Nepa, the cowherd Ne- muni, the sage, and Ne, the sender to paradise. Of these the earliest tradition is of Nepa the cowherd- the eponymic ancestor of the clan of Ahbīras who migrated to Nepal. This tradition is recorded in the *Gopālarājvaṃśāvalī*. Although the chronicle was compiled in ca. A.D. 1380s, the compilers had drawn upon sources which went back at least to the A.D. 1050s. Manikya Vardhana, a court- poet of Sthitirajamalla’s time (A.D. 1382- 1395) also mentions Nepa the cowherd as the founder of the Nepalese scion of the Abhīras.

Local traditions are nearly unanimous on the point that prior to the arrival of the Hindu dynasty of the Licchavis in early centuries A.D./B.C., the early settlers of the Nepal Valley were the herdsmen, the cowherds (*gopāla- s*) and buffalo- herds (*mahīṣapāla- s*). *Ne* is cattle, cow, buffalo is some Tibeto- Burman languages of Nepal and *pa* is a suffix for man, very widespread in Tibeto- Burman area. On the basis of these scanty linguistic and ethno- historical evidence, some tentative hypotheses may be hazarded :

- a. *nepa* is a Tibeto- Burman stem consisting of the roots *ne* (cow, buffalo, cattle) and *pā* (man, keeper);

b. nepa was sanskritised as *Nepāla/nevāla*, possibly on the analogy of *gopala* (cowherd). Tibeto- Burman pa can elegantly be transformed into Indo- Aryan *pāla/vāla* (keeper).

The later Hindu- Buddhist puranas and chronicles may have found the idea of a cowherd as the eponymic ancestor of the country somewhat unpalatable to their religious and cultured taste. Nepa the cowherd was conveniently metamorphosed into Ne the sage or Adi Buddha- the sender to paradise ! The original meaning was lost and forgotten in the process of sanskritisation and linguistic acculturation.

In conclusion, one can only quote what the late Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the National Professor in the Humanities and perhaps twentieth- century India's most leading Indo- Aryan scholar, had to say on the word *Nepāla* :

Various derivations of the name Nepal (*Nepāla*) were proposed by the Pandits of Nepal in medieval times, both Buddhist and Brahman. It would appear, however, that the name came from that of a Tibeto- Burman speaking tribe, the ancestors of the present- day Newar people, and consists of two elements- - a prefix *Ne- -*, of uncertain meaning (it may be the name of some hero- king or priest among the tribe) and the proper tribal name *pāla* or *bāl-* the meaning of which in Newari is lost. (Chatterjee, 1974:64)

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