



# The Last Nomadic Tribe of Nepal: The Rautes

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## Abstract

*Nepal is often associated with a series of snow-capped mountains and the revered birthplace of Lord Gautam Buddha. However, it cannot be denied that the country welcomes visits from the 'unknown' to partake in the infinite spectrum of cultures, languages, and customs. Among these, the **Raute**—a small and marginalized group of hunter-gatherers—stand out as the last remaining nomadic tribe in Nepal. The Raute, believed to be a part of the Khas Aryas group, have lived a reclusive existence in the forests of the Karnali, Dailekh, and Surkhet provinces for centuries. The issue is further exacerbated by a threat to their civilization and well-being. Their way of life, guided by three core principles—**no settlements, no agriculture, and no formal education**—is now under significant threat due to the rapid escalation of crony capitalism and modernization. Today, fewer than 150 of them remain as the final vestiges of a 900-year-old folklore of “eccentric nomadic barbarisms”; a derogatory term used by the civil societies. Thus, the government of Nepal considers their way of life as some wildly romantic existence living cheek-by-jowl with nature, yet compels them to give up the norm and gradually conform towards the ‘mainstream’, regardless of how ‘xenophobic’ the nomads feel.*

*This paper examines the complex challenges facing the Raute, including their social, economic, and political dynamics, and critically analyzes the role of the Nepali government and other external actors. It argues that a deeper understanding of the Raute's cultural resilience and their deep-seated xenophobia is essential for developing effective conservation policies that respect their right to self-determination and preserve their unique heritage.*

**Keywords:** *Nomads, mainstream society, minority, xenophobia, crony capitalism, barbarism.*

## 1. Introduction

The Raute community's existence in Nepal's rugged wilderness represents a remarkable example of cultural endurance in the face of modernizing pressures. While their lifestyle may appear arduous to urban dwellers, it is a conscious choice driven by an unwavering will to survive and maintain ancestral traditions. Historically, these clandestine hunter-gatherers

inhabited the central hills and mountains of Nepal. Today, a small population resides in the "middle hills, between the flat land of Nepal's southern Terai region and the Himalayas" (Newey, 2016).

The Raute's eccentric way of life faces its most significant threat from political and social assimilation efforts by the Government of Nepal. Immense pressure is placed on them to adopt a sedentary, so-called "civilized" lifestyle, a push that often disregards their values and preferences. This push for assimilation, fueled by external perceptions of their existence as being on the "verge of destruction," highlights a fundamental conflict between state policy and indigenous rights. The Raute, for their part, have consistently resisted these efforts, prioritizing their unique predilections over conformity. This paper provides a detailed look into the life, culture, and challenges of the Raute, drawing on available research to shed light on their struggle for survival and cultural preservation.

## **2. The Role of the Nepali Government**

The Nepali government's engagement with the Raute community has been marked by both assistance and attempts at assimilation. On one hand, the government provides them with special grants, such as 10,750 Nepalese Rupees per family during the Dashain festival to purchase a goat, in an effort to encourage them to settle. On the other hand, these gestures are often seen as a means to convince them to abandon their nomadic lifestyle.

Significant dialogue between the Raute and the government occurred in 2008 when a group of Raute chiefs met with then-President Dr. Ram Baran Yadav and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The discussion centered on addressing their grievances, particularly concerning the possession of land for wood-making and fine woodcraft, which is essential to their livelihood. Despite the Rautes' historical refusal to hold Nepali citizenship, the government views them as national assets and seeks to integrate them into the nation's fabric.

In 2005, a Constituent Assembly debate explored the question of whether the nomadic Rautes are a "Precious National Treasure or a Burden to the State" (Thapa, 2017). This discussion led to a commitment to provide general and specialized healthcare services to the community, acknowledging their difficulties and seeking to uplift their living standards while respecting their unique position.

## **3. Life of the Raute Community**

The Raute community is not only one of Nepal's endangered tribes but also one of the last hunter-gatherer groups in Asia, making a detailed analysis of their lifestyle of critical importance (Reinhard, 1974). Their life is governed by three strict principles: no permanent settlements, no agriculture, and no formal education.

### **3.1 Animism and Xenophobia**

The Raute are known for their strong sense of secrecy and xenophobia, which they believe protects them from a "hunting God" that might become enraged if "alien" members enter the

tribe. This fear is a primary reason for their isolated existence. They practice a form of animism and move their camps every three weeks to avoid staying in one place for too long. They do, however, engage in limited intercultural communication with traders, exchanging their handcrafted goods for money, food, and tobacco.

The community employs "tactical defenses" to maintain their nomadic existence and to deflect attempts at "social upliftment" from local farmers (Fortier, 2009). For instance, they may claim to be farmers to avoid scrutiny, despite their very different way of life.

### **3.2 Social Life and Cultural Identity**

Despite their seemingly rugged appearance and secluded nature, the Rautes possess a strong and unapologetic pride in their heritage. Their social interactions are primarily limited to local farmers, with whom they build relationships to secure permission for their animals to graze. They have endured prejudice and negative perceptions from settled communities due to their distinct lifestyle.

### **3.3 Festivals and Rituals**

The Raute community follows a blended doctrine of Hinduism and Animism. They celebrate major festivals such as Dashain for 15 days, which marks the triumph of good over evil. Other festivals, like Tihar and Makar Sankranti, are also celebrated with dancing and singing. During these festive periods, they typically move to denser forest areas to celebrate with their families.

### **3.4 Death and Funeral Rites**

A unique practice among the Rautes is their tradition of shifting settlements after the death of a tribe member. Unlike the Hindu custom of cremation, they bury their dead. The decision to move is made by the community, reflecting a form of "The greatest happiness of the greatest number" in their communal lifestyle.

## **4. Economic Life**

The traditional economic life of the Rautes centered on monkey-hunting. However, this practice is diminishing as the community becomes more involved in a cash economy and trade. The contemporary generation of Rautes has begun to realize that isolation is no longer a viable option for survival.

### **4.1 Handicrafts and Trade**

The Rautes sustain their livelihoods by creating handicrafts, primarily made by men. A notable item is the *Medhush*, a wooden box used for storing money and tools, which is passed down as an heirloom. These handicrafts are sold both domestically and internationally. For instance, some of their items are processed and refined in factories before being exported to European markets, where they can sell for up to £40. The income from these sales is used to purchase essential goods such as food and tobacco. Since 2009, the Nepali government has also provided a monthly cash allowance of 985 Nepalese Rupees to each Raute member.

## 5. Political Life

The Raute community has a distinct political structure. Four chiefs are directly elected by the community, with one designated as the "Mahamukhiya" (head chief). While the decision to move settlements is ideally a unanimous one, the chief's final word holds significant weight.

The community's nomadic lifestyle has led to tensions with villagers due to the encroachment on private lands, which results in damage to properties and increasing hostility. The lack of proper compensation mechanisms for these damages has further exacerbated conflicts.

## 6. Status of Women and Children

The Raute community is notable for its lack of gender-biased norms. Both men and women are viewed as "people with potential" and have specific roles within the community. Women's roles extend beyond "rearing, bearing, and nurturing" to include assisting in household chores and trade. However, there is one known gender-based division of labor: only men are permitted to carve bowls for sale. Children do not attend formal schools; instead, they learn a special set of skills from their guardians, with even young children as old as four making valiant efforts to assist with daily tasks.

## 7. Criticism and Challenges

Despite the romanticized view of their nomadic lifestyle, the Raute community faces several severe challenges:

- **Malnutrition:** Children are often malnourished due to a lack of sufficient and nourishing meals.
- **Unsanitary Living Conditions:** The practice of open defecation and the absence of proper sanitation facilities lead to unsanitary living conditions, widespread diseases, and untimely deaths.
- **Land Encroachment:** The Rautes are often perceived as a nuisance by villagers, and their movement frequently results in damage to private property, escalating conflict.
- **Negligent Government Schemes:** Critics argue that the government and concerned authorities have often been negligent in implementing effective schemes to support the community without forcing them to abandon their way of life.

## 8. Conclusion

Nepal may not be the largest democracy in the world, nor is it likely to surpass any state in terms of population, nor is it the most sought-after in the realms of abundant natural resources in the international arena. Even yet, it might not be the ultimate paradise to satiate a life-long wanderlust.

Nepal's history as a nation that maintained its sovereignty without succumbing to colonial rule has shaped its unique identity. This resilience is also reflected in the Raute community,

which, despite immense external pressure, has preserved its distinct way of life. While critics may view nomadism as an obsolete practice in a post-modern age, the theory of **cultural relativism** provides a powerful framework for understanding and respecting the Raute's choices.

The challenge for the Nepali government is to move beyond a narrow, "civilized" paradigm and adopt a more nuanced approach. Instead of compelling the Raute to conform, the government should focus on preserving their indigenous heritage while addressing the critical issues of malnutrition, health, and conflict with settled communities. By ensuring a safe and supportive environment for the Raute, Nepal can uphold its commitment to its indigenous communities and demonstrate a model of cultural preservation that respects the sovereignty and freedom of all its people.

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