

# Sanskritization in Nepal: The Impact of Social Stratification

Raju K.C.<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Social stratification is the division of people into various groups or strata in a community according to their cultural beliefs, traditions, or occupation. Both in Nepal and all throughout the world, it is a widely accepted practice. M. N. Srinivas introduced the idea of "Sanskritization," which refers to the lower caste adopting the social customs, practices, and behaviors of the upper caste in order to advance in social position and hierarchy. Additionally, it involves changing their surname, getting married to girls from higher social classes, using Hindu scripts and Vedas, and changing their line of work. The social barriers relating to class discrimination and distinction in society are also being broken down by globalization, westernization, and urbanization.

**Keywords:** *Social stratification, Sanskritization, high caste, and low caste*

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## Introduction

Sociologists refer to a system of social inequality based on a hierarchy of groups, individuals as stratification: an organized ranking of entire groups of individuals that upholds uneven authority and economic incentives in a society. The distribution of wealth and income is just one indicator of these unequal incentives; the depressing mortality rates of underdeveloped communities are another. Stratification is the process through which social injustices are passed down from one generation to the next, resulting in social groups that are ranked low to high (Schaefer, 2010). Indian sociologist Shrinivas 1950's give the meaning of Sanskritization as the process through which a lower caste, tribe, or other group transforms its traditions, beliefs, and way of life in order to more closely resemble a higher or frequently twice-born caste (Srinivas, 1953).

Throughout ancient times, social hierarchy has divided individuals into many strata, positions, and classes according to caste, class, ethnicity, gender, status and race. Through generations, this social stratification breeds superiority and inferiority,

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer in Sociology at Padmakanya Multiple Campus, T.U., Kathmandu

purity and pollution, and sacredness and profanity within the population. In this essay, I shall outline each of these through an examination of relevant literary works that make use of Sanskritization.

The sociologist M. N. Srinivas developed the idea of social transformation known as "Sanskritization" in 1952 to explain how upward mobility happens in India's caste society, which was previously believed to be static. By adopting higher caste social practices like vegetarianism and the veneration of Brahminical gods, lower caste groups strive to elevate their rank and position within the caste hierarchy. The theory of Sanskritization acknowledges the wide regional variation of caste groups across linguistic, ethnic, and geographic boundaries, as well as the local power struggles that may change a sub caste group's position in the hierarchy, even if they have no structural impact on the general caste schema. The theory also supports the idea of a Brahmin-centric society, which is out of line with current caste politics because it reduces lower castes to the position of mimics (Sadana, 2015).

Sanskritization is the process through which castes or tribes at the bottom of the caste structure attempt to advance by imitating the traditions and customs of the dominant or upper castes, according to sociology and anthropology definitions. It is one of the reforms made to counteract the discrimination caused by the caste-law hierarchy and other sociocultural disparities in society. Typically, lower caste and tribe changes are followed by a claim to a higher caste position than that which the local community has historically accorded to the claimant class. In general, lower caste members adopt higher caste culture and rituals to elevate their social rank and uphold Sanskritization.

This idea investigates societal disparity and the steps people take to end discrimination and achieve justice for themselves. Although adopting a new culture results in the erasure of one's own traditional ideas, culture, and practices, assimilation introduces a new culture and notion to the group of people. The caste system has played a significant role in human evolution throughout history, and the hierarchy has been documented from ancient times up to the present.

Throughout history, social stratification has contributed to human growth. According to many socioeconomic variables like wealth, income, race, education, ethnicity, gender, occupation, social standing, or derived power, there have been incidences of population separation in society (social and political). As a result, social rank and caste distinctions are frequently used in Hindu-majority nations like India and Nepal, where individuals are divided into high and low caste groups. These methods have allowed people to differentiate their occupation, social standing,

and property according to the class to which they belong. Social stratification in the context of our nation, Nepal, refers to the old caste system, which is made up of four major social groups, or Varna: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. Formerly, only the Khas, Madhesi, and Newar communities (Indo-Aryan societies) practiced this habit; but, since the 18th century, non-Hindu indigenous ethnicities and tribes have also adopted it. Nonetheless, discrimination on the basis of caste does not frequently occur among the indigenous population. Although dividing the population into various social classes, social stratification resulted in social inequality because of the occupations and privileges that people were given based on the social class to which they belonged. Sudra and Vaishya members of the lower class were discriminated against and denied access to certain privileges. Jung Bahadur Rana commissioned the Nepalese Civil Code Muluki Ain, which further defined social customs that had their origins in conventional Hindu law. There is the hierarchical order among the caste like the Holy Thread wearer (Tagadhari), Nonenslavable Alcohol Consumers (Namasinya Matwali), Enslavable Alcohol Consumers (Masinya Matwali), Water-Unacceptable but Touchable (Pani Na Chalne Chhoichhito Haalnu Naparne), Water-Unacceptable touchable (Pani Na Chalne Chhoichhito Haalnu Naparne) and Water- Unacceptable Untouchable (Pani Na Chalne Chhoichhito Haalnu Parne) respectively. This technique established a hierarchical structure that eventually led to distinct caste-based discrimination and social inequity that needed to be rectified through various methods over time. Also, it led to the eminent members of lower castes adapting the customs of the so-called high class in order to be on an equal footing with them. Consequently, the idea of Sanskritization emerged, which has been one of the corrective measures taken by the society to ensure that all of its members are on an equal footing.

Sanskritization is the deliberate adoption of social and religious practices (Such as vegetarianism, hiring Brahman priests, using meatless offerings, using Sanskrit mantras, and other aspects of Brahminical cultic practice) that are associated with Brahmins or deemed prestigious because they are approved or promulgated in Brahminical literature (or by Brahmin authorities in other fora), regardless of whether they are true or not. Khas, Magar, Newar, and Tharu people of Nepal have also reported seeing this occurrence. The theory has come under fire for attempting to explain the effects of social inequalities and how they affect those who belong to lower castes. The goal is to learn about the idea of Sanskritization and how lower caste members assimilate culture and tradition in order to combat caste prejudice and advance to better social position.

## **Research Methodology**

In this study, I have employed qualitative methodology to obtain information on Stratification and Sanskritization process in Nepal. Qualitative information applies to collect the information based on process of Sanskritization in different time and contexts, which included the stories and narratives of the Nepal that I collected through review of articles and books based on Caste inequality and process of social stratification. The process of review helps for the comparison of the information with my study.

## **Sanskritization in Nepalese Society: An Overview**

Throughout history, social stratification has been a defining characteristic of society. The practice of occupational task assignment has been one of the significant factors in the creation of social hierarchy and discrimination among society's members, even if it offers the framework and networking necessary for the society to work and function in order. For instance, there are four classes in Nepalese society: Brahmin, Kshetriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. Also, it has divided the groupings into high and low caste, respectable and untouchables, resulting in a gulf between the group members.

It seeks to comprehend social stratification and the Sanskritization that results from it. The idea of "Sanskritization," in which members of lower castes have contested the social order and attempted to integrate themselves into society, is intriguing. They are not only establishing a new culture pattern but also exemplifying acculturation, or assimilation of the dominant culture, by adopting the culture and norms of the so-called high class and giving up their unhygienic profession. Untouchables thus creating a distance between the individuals of the group. So, in comparison to their older generation, the younger generation would enjoy greater freedom, societal benefits, and opportunity. The study of Sanskritization will also enable us to comprehend social customs, the difficulties that lower caste societies encounter, and their attempts to repress their culture and adapt to others. It also helps me explain the current Westernization and modernization of Nepali society, giving me insight into how social norms and individual understanding are evolving.

## **Historical Genesis of Sanskritization**

M. N. Srinivas had advanced the theory of Sanskritization. The thesis, an ethnographic examination of the Kodava (Coorgs) group in Karnataka in his D.Phil. thesis at Oxford, was eventually published as a book. The book disputed the widely held belief that caste was a strict, unchangeable institution at the time. Sanskritization was a notion used to address the true complexity and elasticity of

caste relations. It brought the dynamics of the renegotiation of status by different castes and communities in India into academic attention. The goal of Sanskritization is frequently to obtain the famous Vedic-age Varna statuses of Brahmin or Kshatriya. Vegetarianism, teetotalism, the veneration of "Sanskritic deities," or hiring Brahmans for ritual work are all examples of ways to become more Sanskritized (Staal, 1963). In addition to these, traditional beliefs and ideals from the Hindu and Sanskritic Vedic cultures are also adopted. Sanskritization is the practice of copying or emulating the way of life of the upper caste in order for the lower caste to make up for their social, religious, and economic disadvantages (Dwivedi A. V., 2018). Although being viewed as a copy of Brahmin ideals and practices, it's interesting to note that practices among the lower caste have moved about. To advance their social position, they also want to emulate the local powerful and important castes, such as Vaishyas and Kshatriyas. Dwivedi (2018) again define the practice of de-Sanskritization is more prevalent in the present setting than it was in the past, when there was a high degree of discrimination based on lifestyle and vocation and a hierarchical system that was in place. Few sociologists refer to this phenomenon as "Westernization," and it occurs when members of higher castes emulate and adopt the social norms of members of lower castes. (Mencher, 1974). A non-vegetarian diet and the intake of alcohol are two examples.

Srinivas had talked about cultural, regional, and Varna models of Sanskritization. The codes of conduct and purity that set the Brahmins apart from the lower caste are cultural practices like wearing the sacred thread, observing endogamy, worshipping using the methods outlined in the scriptures, forbidding the consumption of alcohol and meat, believing in myths and religious stories, and adhering to caste-based restrictions. Sanskritization is the process by which members of lower castes deliberately adopt such behavioral habits. Srinivas had talked about cultural, regional, and Varna models of Sanskritization. The codes of conduct and purity that set the Brahmins apart from the lower caste are cultural practices like wearing the sacred thread, observing endogamy, worshipping using the methods outlined in the scriptures, forbidding the consumption of alcohol and meat, believing in myths and religious stories, and adhering to caste-based restrictions. Sanskritization is the process by which members of lower castes deliberately adopt such behavioral habits.

Due to the idea of Sanskritization and the numerous changes in the historical and cultural setting, culture has been identified as flexible and ever-evolving rather than fixed. Similar to Hindu societies in India, Nepal's cultural and religious practices

are founded on social stratification and caste distinctiveness, which define a society based on its occupation, cultural ideology, and cultural practices. Sanskritization has also been used in Nepal, where the lower caste has emulated the higher caste to obtain social benefits and rise in rank within a generation. A good example would be the Duras-Mongoloid group's sociocultural mobility in Lamjung, West Nepal (Gurung, 1988).

Another example in the context of Nepal is the habit of various castes attempting to improve their social standing by connecting their ancestry to historically and socially elevated castes. It has become normal practice for people to identify as "Thakuri," the claimed royal ties, and to adopt their ideals, beliefs, and ancient traditions. Also, they have been idealizing the language by using other phrases and calling people like nobles. Both acculturation and assimilation have resulted from it. The diversity of the Nepalese culture is shocking, but Sanskritization has forced people to give up their cultural traditions and identities in order to be respected by their fellow citizens. The Hindu Sanskars (life cycle ceremonies) are also being gradually incorporated into their daily lives (Dahal, 1985). The low occupational castes have also changed their surnames. As examples, consider the Teli, who are oil dealers and crushers, the Kalwars, who sell alcoholic beverages, and the Sundis, who distill liquids. These people changed their surnames from Sahu or Sah to the Thakuri title Shah and even wed Chhetri girls. Similar to this, the Duras of Western Nepal attempted to enlist in the British Army by changing their citizenship to reflect the "Gurung" caste (Gurung, 1988). By adopting Sanskritization process, they have also absorbed Gurung social customs and traditions like Putpote, Ghantu (religious festival), and Rodi as being equivalent to their own.

### **Debate and Discourses of Sanskritization in Nepal**

All societies have social stratification as a defining feature. The idea that the socio-cultural system is not static is supported by Sanskritization (Gurung, 1988). M. N. Srinivas developed the idea of Sanskritization from his ethnographic study, which showed how the lower caste imitated the Brahmin culture and Hindu tradition of wearing thread to elevate themselves. This illustrates the adaptability of culture and the ingrained cultural discrimination that has forced members of the lower caste to renounce their traditions and culture in order to blend in with the popular crowd. This has also been seen in Nepal's numerous castes and societies, where people try to project an image of superiority by adopting Hindu customs and ideals, changing their last name, and changing their vocation. Many foundations exist for social stratification, which divides the population into several groups. According to the

Vedic Varna system and the Nepalese caste system based on Hindu scripture, the principal caste groups are Brahmin, Kshetriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. The Brahmins are regarded as having the greatest position in society due to their vegetarian diet, abstinence from alcohol and other ingredients, three days of isolation for women during their periods, wearing the sacred thread, and reading the Hindu Scriptures and Vedas. They have embraced cultural customs and traditions to preserve their society due to the widespread adoption of education, communication, and westernization.

The lower caste began switching to clean and well-paid trades due to poor work status and occupations that involved cleaning, washing, and other unclean and low-paying duties. Other factors include avoiding alcoholic beverages and eating a vegetarian diet. Also, it improved their social and financial standing, making them more motivated to work hard than their upper caste peers. Sanskritization refers to the process by which a lower tribe, caste, or any other group modifies its ideology, rituals, customs, and way of life to follow and conform to the standards of a higher or more frequently dwija "twice-born" caste (Dwivedi A. B., 2018)

The lower caste has received help from education, globalization, and urbanization to improve their social standing, while the higher caste has adopted western culture, such as drinking alcoholic beverages, adopting a non-vegetarian diet, and reducing their use of holy, sacred thread. De-Sanskritization or westernization gave the lower caste the right status, and social stratification is no longer as strict as it once was due to mobility.

Thus, Sanskritization had been one of the effective approaches to combat prejudice based on social standing and financial means. As a result of this approach, many people now have improvised surnames and occupation lines that differ from those of their older ancestors, which were given to them by their caste.

## **Conclusion**

Sanskritization can therefore be seen as a result of social stratification, a technique that once served a purpose but no longer has the same significance. The contemporary era is one of transition and revolution, in which dubious beliefs and actions are not just mindlessly accepted but are instead investigated. The importance of equality and social virtue in today's culture makes it crucial to address each person's rights. My opinion is that the underprivileged and socially and economically disadvantaged populace underwent the Sanskritization movement to raise their social status. It is a cultural adaptation that encourages people to abandon their own traditions and cultures in favor of those that are socially acknowledged as belonging to a higher

social level. Important examples may also be found in the context of our own nation, Nepal, where caste groupings like the Telis in the south and the west and the Duras in the west all claim descent from the Thakuris and Noble family. It is a fascinating assimilation technique that highlights the population's diversity and the problems with traditional thinking. We would have access to rich data and statistics on how diversity has changed in our nation of Nepal with further research in this area and acculturation practice. Studies on this subject are strongly advised given the evolution of observances and legacy in modern times and the fact that this is a study of works of literature on the subject, which severely limits the generalization.

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