

Shaivism's Ontological and Social Vision: Readings from the Vaisesika Sutra and Tantric Texts

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Abstract

This article examines Shaivism's ontological and social vision through a critical engagement with the Vaisesika Sutra and Tantric texts, focusing on how classical materialistic principles are interpreted within Shaiva philosophy to articulate a dynamic and cohesive understanding of the world and society. The Vaisesika Sutra, known for its materialistic framework that categorizes reality into *dravya*(substances), *guna* (knowledge and skill), and *karma*(actions), emphasizes the natural laws governing the universe. While it presents an objective and law-bound order, Shaivism interprets these laws as being established and sustained by Shiva, the ultimate divine principle who is the maker and regulator of natural order. This Shaiva interpretation transforms apparent tensions—such as between the permanence of substance and the flux of action—into a dynamic dialectic where contradiction becomes a fundamental force driving change and transformation. By sacralizing natural law as an expression of Shiva's will, Shaivism presents the world as a unified, living reality infused with divine presence. Tantric texts extend this vision by framing social order and justice as expressions of cosmic balance, where conflict and opposition coexist in dynamic harmony upheld by Shiva and his Shakti (power). This conception suggests that social tensions and contradictions are not to be suppressed but embraced as creative impulses that sustain renewal and harmony. Drawing from this philosophical foundation, the article explores the potential application of Shaiva thought to the contemporary quest for a just and inclusive society in Nepal—a society where diversity, social justice, and unity emerge from the dynamic interplay of differences rather than enforced uniformity. Shaivism's vision offers a paradigm that embraces complexity and contradiction as sources of social cohesion and ethical governance, thereby contributing a rich philosophical resource for addressing Nepal's pluralistic social challenges.

Key words: Pasupata Sutra, tantra, shaivism, class, caste, society

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Introduction

Shaivism, as both a philosophical system and lived religious tradition, has served as a foundational framework for understanding human interactions, governance, and social organization in South Asia, particularly in Nepal. Genealogies, inscriptions, and oral traditions highlight Shaivism's pervasive influence on Nepali society, emphasizing its role beyond ritual practice into socio-political domains (Bista, 1991; Tiwari, 2001). Central to this worldview is the Vaisesika philosophy, which articulates a materialistic framework categorizing reality into substances (*dravya*), qualities, and actions (*karma*), governed by natural laws. Shaivism

reinterprets these laws as created and regulated by Shiva, who is regarded as the ultimate maker of natural law, thus sacralizing the natural order (Chattopadhyaya, 1959; Sastri, 1976).

While Vaisesika philosophy highlights an objective and law-bound universe, it also recognizes inherent tensions—such as between permanence (substance) and flux (action)—that function dialectically to drive change and transformation (Sastri, 1976). Shaivism embraces and transcends these contradictions by positing Shiva as the ultimate reality who manifests through and integrates these opposing forces, thus framing the cosmos as a dynamic unity infused with divine presence (King, 1999).

Complementing this materialist foundation, Tantric texts extend Shaivism's social vision by conceptualizing social order and justice as expressions of cosmic balance, where conflict and opposition coexist in creative harmony upheld by Shiva and Shakti (Hamilton, 1819; Oman, 1905). Rather than suppressing social tensions and contradictions, Tantra embraces them as vital creative impulses that sustain renewal, ethical governance, and societal harmony (Chemjong, 2003; Gurung, 2019; Tiwari, 2001).

Historically, Shaivism's principles of *sahastitva* (coexistence) and *samuhikta* (collectivism) have fostered social cohesion and egalitarian values across diverse Nepali communities. Anthropological studies document Shaivism's prevalence among Khas Arya groups—such as Brahmins, Thakuris, Chhetris, and Dasnami Sanyasis—as well as among Janajati communities, including Magars, Gurungs, Newars, and Kirats, mediated by priests (*pujari*) and tantric healers (*dhami-jhankri*) (Bista, 1991; Tiwari, 2001; Chemjong, 2003). Francis Buchanan Hamilton's early 19th-century observations affirm the dominance of Tantric Shaivism intertwined with Vedic traditions like the Shukla Yajurveda, reflecting a syncretic religious culture that persists today (Hamilton, 1819).

Scholars have acknowledged Shaivism's egalitarian and rational dimensions. Oman (1905) highlights how followers of Shiva historically resisted caste hierarchies and promoted logical reasoning, while Majumdar (2017) praises the rationalism inherent in early Indian thought, contrasting it with the later dominance of Vedanta and Dharmasutras, which he argues reinforced caste-based exploitation. Dharmendranath Sastri (1976) identifies a philosophical dichotomy between idealism and materialism in South Asian traditions and underscores the creative positivity of Vaisesika philosophy, though he does not focus on its dialectical contradictions. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (1959) situates Shiva and Devi worship within Lokayata's materialistic framework but overlooks explicit notions of contradiction and class struggle in Tantra. Richard King (1999) critiques Vedanta as serving elite interests and praises Vaisesika's rationalism, but similarly neglects its dialectical aspects.

Despite this, the concept of contradiction as a driver of social and ontological change remains underexplored in Shaiva studies, especially in the Nepali context. Moreover, the specific socio-political implications of Tantric justice and Shaivism's dialectical worldview for Nepal's pluralistic and hierarchical society have not been sufficiently examined. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing Shaivism's dialectical philosophy through Vaisesika's transactional framework of matter and consciousness and Tantric notions of cosmic justice. It argues that Shaivism's embrace of contradiction provides a powerful theoretical lens to challenge social exploitation and promote egalitarianism and cohesion in Nepal's diverse society.

This study has the following objectives: - to critically examine Shaivism's ontological and social vision by integrating Vaisesika philosophy's materialist framework with Tantric

notions of justice and cosmic balance. To explore how these philosophical resources can inform the pursuit of an egalitarian, inclusive, and pluralistic society in contemporary Nepal. It attempts to answer the two research questions: - How does the Vaisesika concept of contradiction explain the dynamic relationship between matter, consciousness, and social order? In what ways can Tantric Shaivism's emphasis on coexistence and cosmic justice contribute to addressing social inequalities and fostering harmony in Nepal's multi-ethnic society?

The study challenges dominant idealist and hierarchical narratives by foregrounding indigenous, materialist, and egalitarian thought systems rooted in local traditions. It lays the groundwork for future research on how classical South Asian philosophies can inform contemporary discourses on pluralism, social justice, and ethical governance, not only in Nepal but also across culturally diverse societies facing similar tensions between tradition and modernity.

Materials and Methodology

This research employs a **textual analytical approach** to examine the philosophical and socio-political dimensions of Shaivism, with particular attention to the dialectical relationship between matter (*dravya*), knowledge or qualities (*guna*), and human actions (*karma*). These categories, drawn from Vaisesika philosophy, are critically analyzed to understand how they inform social structure, agency, and justice within Shaiva thought. The **primary sources** analyzed include foundational Sanskrit texts such as the Vaisesika Sutra, Pasupata Sutra, Rigveda, Atharva Veda, Kauṭilya's Arthasastra, Mahanirvana Tantra, and Yoni Tantra. These texts are examined not only for their metaphysical assertions but also for their embedded social and political philosophies, especially as they relate to governance, meritocracy, and egalitarianism.

The study also draws on **classical commentaries**—including Kaundinya's exegesis of the *Pasupata Sutra*—and early modern interpretations of the Arthasastra (Chakroborti, 1970; Shamasastri, 1951), to trace how the Shaiva school of thought conceptualized the shaping of human needs, desires, and institutions through material and moral principles. This philosophical inquiry is grounded in the indigenous epistemology of *darsana*, literally "seeing" or "experiencing", which emphasizes knowledge through direct observation and lived experience. By situating Vaisesika and tantric ideas in the socio-historical context of Nepal, the methodology bridges classical South Asian philosophical tradition with anthropological insights to explore how these systems have influenced—and can continue to inform—contemporary debates on social justice, pluralism, and ethical governance in Nepali society.

Results

The textual analysis of Shaiva philosophy, particularly through the lenses of Vaisesika and tantric traditions, reveals a dynamic framework where matter (*dravya*), qualities (*guna*), and actions (*karma*) interact dialectically to shape both individual agency and social system. This paradigm affirms that contradictions are integral to change, and balancing opposites is essential for both ontological and social harmony. In this light, contemporary Nepali society, with its economic disparities and political volatility, can be analyzed through this Shaiva lens.

Nepal's economy heavily depends on remittances, which accounted for 26.6% of GDP in 2023 (IFAD & IOM, 2023). While this inflow has helped reduce absolute poverty, it has contributed to a dependency syndrome, where productive sectors like agriculture and

manufacturing are neglected. Instead, remittance income primarily fuels household consumption and real estate, reinforcing structural inequality (World Bank, 2023). This remittance-backed economy supports an import-heavy market. In the fiscal year 2022/23, Nepal's trade deficit reached NPR 1.6 trillion (approx. USD 11.08 billion), with imports far outpacing exports (Nepal Rastra Bank, 2023). This imbalance creates class stratification between migrant laborers (often rural and poor) and urban dwellers-traders, wealthy or remittance receivers. The contradiction lies in how the working class sustains the economy, yet remains economically and socially marginalized.

Since the 2008 political transition, Nepal has seen 14 changes in government by 2024 (Le Monde, 2024). Such instability hampers long-term development policies and erodes institutional accountability. Nepotism and power struggles among political elites further delegitimize the democratic process. Corruption remains endemic. Nepal ranked 108th globally in Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, scoring just 34 out of 100 (Transparency International, 2024). Nepal is also on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list owing to deficiencies in its anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorism financing (CFT) systems. Recent scandals, such as cooperative fraud involving political leaders and embezzlement of COVID-19 and earthquake relief funds, have deepened public distrust (MyRepublica, 2024).

Shaiva philosophy, with its dialectic of contradiction and harmony, provides a valuable interpretive framework. It regards social tension not as dysfunction, but as the engine of balance and transformation. The Tantric emphasis on cosmic justice, where Shiva and Shakti uphold the dynamic coexistence of opposites, encourages a pluralistic worldview. Applied to Nepal, this could mean reimagining political economy and governance in terms of coexistence (*sahastitva*) and collectivism (*samuhikta*), affirming diversity and justice over centralization and exclusion.

Discussion

The Vaisesika philosophy provides a rigorously logical and empirical framework that explains the diversity and unity of the world through its doctrine of categories. Its contribution to the development of South Asian logical and scientific thought is significant, particularly in its analysis of substance, atomism, and causality. Kashyap Rishi's Vaisesika Sutra stands as a precursor to both logical positivism and early forms of scientific realism. He was a Vedic philosopher, also known as Kannada and Uluka Rishi.

Ontology in the Vaisesika Philosophy: A Systematic Analysis

The Philosophy of Shaivism is based on Vaisesika philosophy. It offers a systematic realist ontology rooted in categorization of all existent entities. The Vaisesika Sutra define and classifies reality into six primary categories (*padarthas*), later expanded to seven. The cornerstone of Vaisesika ontology lies in its doctrine of **padarthas**—"that which can be named and known"—which encompasses all entities that can be the object of valid cognition (*pramana*). Kashyap Rishi begins his sutras with a profound assertion that "The means of right knowledge is the means of obtaining the highest good" (*sutra* I.1.1; Jha, 1917, p. 5). *Dravya* (Substance) is the foundational category in which qualities and actions are inherent in it. It serves as the substrate of empirical reality. There are **nine** kinds of substances:- earth (*prthivi*), water (*ap*), fire (*tejas*), air (*vayu*), ether (*akasa*), time (*kala*), space (*dik*), self (*atman*), mind

(*manas*) (*Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* I.1.5–6; Jha, 1917, pp. 8–10). Substances are either **eternal** (atoms, self, mind, space, time) or **non-eternal** (composite bodies).

Qualities (*guna*) are attributes that inhere in substances and cannot exist independently. They are not capable of producing motion. Kashyap identifies **seventeen** qualities: color, taste, smell, touch, number, size, separateness, conjunction, disjunction, priority, posteriority, intelligence, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, and effort (*Sūtras* I.1.6–7; Jha, 1917, pp. 10–12). Each quality is non-repeatable in itself and unique to the substance in which it inheres.

Karma (action) or motion is distinct from quality and can only exist in a substance. There are five types of motion: - ejection (*utkṣepaṇa*), attraction (*avakṣepaṇa*), contraction (*akuncana*), expansion (*prasaraṇa*), locomotion (*gamana*) (*Sūtra* I.1.9; Jha, 1917, p. 13). Karma is transitory and not inherent in the self, but in the body and external objects. **Samanya** (generality/universality) refers to the class-character or universal present in multiple particulars. It allows for cognition of commonality among objects. Kashyap Rishi distinguishes between higher and lower universals, suggesting a hierarchy: “The genus is eternal and exists in many” (*Sūtra* II.2.1; Jha, 1917, p. 55). *Samanya* resides in substances, qualities, and actions. *Vaiśeṣa* is the principle of individuation among eternal substances such as atoms, selves, and time. Though imperceptible, it is inferred to explain diversity among otherwise similar entities. “It is through particularity that difference among atoms is recognized” (*Sūtra* II.2.7; Jha, 1917, p. 58). *Vaiśeṣa* is critical to distinguish identical-looking atoms or souls.

Samavaya (Inherence) is a unique, eternal, and inseparable relation between two entities that cannot exist independently—such as substance and quality, whole and part, or universals and particulars. “Inherence is that connection which is eternal and not produced” (*Sūtra* VII.1.1; Jha, 1917, p. 251). Without *samavaya*, the explanation of the unity of composite things is impossible. Although not mentioned in the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*, *abhava* or absence was accepted as the **seventh** category by later commentators like Prasastapada and Sridhara. There are four types of *abhava*:- *pragabhava* – prior absence, *pradhvaṁsabhava* – posterior absence, *atyantabhava* – absolute non-existence, and *anyonyabhava* – mutual non-existence (discussed in Appendix; Jha, 1917, pp. 301–308).

Atomism (Paramāṇuvāda)

Material objects are composed of eternal, indivisible atoms (*paramāṇu*). Atoms of earth, water, fire, and air combine in dyads, triads, and larger clusters to form perceptible matter. “Substance is produced from a cause by conjunction of atoms” (*Sūtra* VII.1.20; Jha, 1917, p. 265). This makes *Vaiśeṣika* philosophy one of the earliest schools of atomic realism. *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* affirms ontological **pluralism**: the real world is made of diverse, independent substances. It is also **realist** in that it affirms the objective reality of both particulars and universals. Kashyap Rishi dismisses idealism and posits an external world known through perception and inference (*Sūtra* I.2.1; Jha, 1917, p. 19).

Causality and Epistemological Basis

The school accepts ***asatkaryavāda***—a doctrine that the effect does **not** pre-exist in the cause. Three types of causes (*kaṛaṇa*) are outlined: - *samavayī* – inherent cause, *asamavayī* – non-inherent cause, and *nimitta* – efficient cause (*Sūtras* V.2.1–5; Jha, 1917, pp. 183–185). Only two means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇas*) are admitted: - **perception (*pratyakṣa*)** – direct sensory cognition, and **inference (*anumāna*)** – cognition through reasoning (*Sūtra* I.1.3;

Jha, 1917, p. 6). These means are considered sufficient to understand both manifest and hidden realities.

The classification of individuals based on their karma—their activities and professions—and their characteristics are not seen as personal attributes but as class-bound constructs (Sinha, 1923, pp. 25-29, 38-42). Kashyapa further posits that only time and space are free from class distinctions, while all material entities, including humans, belong to one class or another (Sinha, 1923, p. 18). The tension and competition among classes lead to struggles as they contend for dominance and resources (Sinha, 1923, p. 19). This perspective aligns with descriptions found in Vedic literature and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which depict a society organised into four varnas based on profession: Brahmins (intellectuals and sages), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (peasants and artisans).

Kashyap Rishi stresses the importance of justice and collective welfare (Sinha, 1923, pp. 22–30). He argues that human minds are influenced by doubt, aversion, greed, and desire, which can lead to undesirable or harmful actions (Sinha, 1923, pp. 6-8). Therefore, he emphasized the need for a systematic approach to social welfare to prevent such negative actions and to guide human activities in an orderly and constructive manner (Sinha, 1923, pp. 6-8).

The seeds for the Vaisesika sutra lay in the Vedas. Viswamitra and Bharadvaja advocated for the welfare, prosperity, security, and health of all people (Rigveda 3.1.19, 22; 6.1.12–13). Bharadvaja emphasized the importance of economic prosperity for sustaining a strong state and army (Rigveda 6.1.2–3) and advocated for shared access to resources such as food, cattle, and education (Rigveda 6.14; Atharvaveda 6.64.1). Similarly, Viswamitra envisioned a society where equality prevailed in behavior, words, and thoughts (Rigveda 10.191.2).

The Atharvaveda underscores foundational principles of equality and unity within society. It advocates for accessible education as a critical factor for ensuring equality (Atharvaveda 6.64.1). It discourages jealousy and promotes harmonious relationships among individuals (Atharvaveda 3.30.2–3). Respect for parents, intellectuals, and elders is highlighted as essential for societal harmony (Atharvaveda 3.30.5). Furthermore, it warns that discrimination between social classes disrupts societal organization and unity. It suggests that removing contradictions and inequalities is essential for fostering collective well-being (Atharvaveda 6.94.1). The Rigveda also introduces the concept of a welfare state, termed *bhaujya*, which underscores the state's responsibility to direct production and ensure health and education for all (Rigveda 5.66.6).

Similarly, Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* says that the state must ensure economic prosperity, security, and social welfare. Everybody should be able to use the land by paying taxes to the state. The state should also regulate the prices of goods in the market. Similarly, the state must take responsibility for the education and health of children, as well as the care of the elderly, the disabled, and those who are mentally ill (Shamasastri, 1951). This reflects an ancient understanding of governance that prioritizes social welfare and public goods, laying the groundwork for an inclusive and equitable society.

During medieval times, Shaiva scholars composed *tantras* to make their philosophical teachings accessible to the common people. The *Mahanirvana Tantra* states that, since the world is filled with corruption, deceit, and exploitation, its teachings aim for the well-being of

all humans (Avalon, 1953, pp. 11–13). It emphasizes that notions of purity and impurity should not be based on caste distinctions, and all individuals should partake in food consecrated to Sadashiva, who is regarded as Brahma, the lord of intellect (Avalon, 1953, p. 51).

The *tantra* advocates for various social welfare measures, such as digging water tanks, constructing roadside rest houses, planting trees, building bridges over rivers, and providing donations to the poor (Avalon, 1953, p. 222). It emphasizes that rulers should not covet the wealth of their people nor impose excessive taxes. Instead, they are responsible for the welfare of children, orphans, the mentally ill, the elderly, and persons with disabilities (Avalon, 1953, pp. 229-231). Furthermore, the *Mahanirvana Tantra* specifies that only essential commodities, such as food grains, necessary goods, and animals, should be traded, prohibiting the sale of land and human beings (Avalon, 1953, p. 231). It rejects caste-based distinctions in matters of eating, drinking, and marriage, promoting social inclusivity and equality (Avalon, 1953, p. 233).

The Yoni tantra affirms the divinity of women and promotes equality, reverence, and ritual respect toward them. The declaration that “women are divinity, women are life, women are truly jewels” (Magee, 1995, p. 6) places women at the heart of spiritual life. In this worldview, every woman is seen as a manifestation of the Goddess (Shakti), which could support a foundation for gender equality and respect in both spiritual and social domains. This philosophy challenges patriarchal structures by emphasizing female power and agency. In a society where this worldview is internalized, women would likely enjoy higher status, bodily autonomy, and respect. “She has equal rights with men on all levels” (Magee, 1995, p. 6). The injunction that “No man may raise his hand, strike or threaten a woman,” and “One should never speak harshly to maidens or women” (Magee, 1995, p. 6), suggests a normative framework advocating non-violence, protection, and reverence toward women.

The text prohibits child marriage and states that marriage is appropriate only after menstruation. “The yoni which has bled is suitable for worship. Do not worship a yoni which has never bled. Worshipping a yoni which has never bled causes loss of siddhi on every occasion” (Magee, 1995, pp. 16). The union of yoni and linga (female and male genitalia) symbolizes the union of Shakti and Shiva. “One should bring together the yoni and the linga, creating Shiva linga and worship it” (Magee, 1995, pp. 22). “When she is naked, men must kneel and worship her as the Goddess” (Magee, 1995, p. 6) implies that female nudity is not shameful but sacred. This subverts norms of modesty and shame often imposed on women’s bodies. In societies where this view prevails, body autonomy and body positivity might be enhanced, helping to combat objectification, body shaming, and sexual repression.

The *Yoni Tantra* offers a vision of society where femininity is not only respected but revered, where women are spiritual equals, and where violence, coercion, and sexual repression are spiritually and socially condemned. While these teachings are specific to a tantric tradition and may not be universally applied, they provide a powerful counter-narrative to patriarchal norms, especially in South Asian societies.

The Vaiśeṣika philosophy presents a materialist and realist worldview rooted in the categorization of existence into *dravya* (substance), *guṇa* (quality), *karma* (action), *samanya* (generality), *viśeṣa* (particularity), and *samavaya* (inherence). Contrary to Vedantic idealism, Vaiśeṣika grounds its ontology in empirical observation, emphasizing the role of the material world in shaping consciousness and human experience (Sinha, 1923). In this system, matter is

primary, and its transformation through action leads to change—a principle that anticipates a dialectical understanding of the world. The tension between permanence (*dravya*) and change (*karma*) forms the basis of a dynamic reality where contradiction is not merely tolerated but constitutive of existence.

This dialectic is further enriched when interpreted through a Shaiva lens. Vaisesika Sutra provides a theological framework where Shiva is seen as the creator of the natural order and the laws governing *dravya* and *karma*. Shiva, in this sense, becomes the cosmic principle through which duality is integrated—a being who both transcends and manifests within material contradictions. This framework provides a sacralized vision of the natural world, elevating physical reality as a manifestation of the divine, and thereby giving ethical and spiritual significance to worldly engagement.

Tantric traditions expand on this ontological vision by emphasizing coexistence (*sahastitva*) and collectivism (*samuhikta*) as guiding principles for social harmony. Texts such as the *Mahanirvana Tantra* and *Yoni Tantra* frame justice and social order as cosmic equilibria, maintained through the dynamic interplay of Shiva (consciousness) and Shakti (power/matter). Rather than viewing opposites—such as order and chaos, male and female, purity and impurity—as hierarchical, tantra celebrates their interdependence and creative tension (Chattopadhyaya, 1959). This non-dualistic paradigm offers a potent critique of social hierarchies, especially the caste system, as it locates spiritual potential in all beings, irrespective of birth or social rank (Oman, 1905; King, 1999).

In the context of Nepali society, these philosophical insights have practical resonance. Genealogical records, oral traditions, and inscriptions show that Shaivism and Tantric practices have historically shaped notions of governance, kinship, and spiritual authority among diverse ethnic groups—including Brahmins, Thakuris, Chetris, Newars, Magars, Gurungs, and Kirats (Bista, 1991; Tiwari, 2001; Chemjong, 2003). The presence of tantric healers (*dharmi-jhankri*) and *pujari* priests across jati (caste or ethnicity) lines illustrates how Shaiva cosmology became embedded in local practices that emphasized balance, reciprocity, and egalitarian ethics.

Foundations of Social Stratification

Nepal's social fabric has historically been woven through intricate intersections of caste endogamy and clan exogamy, mechanisms that simultaneously allowed and restricted social mobility. While marriage within caste groups maintained ritual purity and preserved lineage, exogamy among clans permitted strategic kinship alliances. Yet, this structure ultimately reinforced rigid social divisions, ensuring the reproduction of occupational heredity and elite control. These caste boundaries played a central role in fragmenting potential class solidarities, thereby suppressing collective resistance against systems of private property and centralized governance.

The roots of caste stratification and private land ownership in Nepal trace back to the Licchavi period. According to the *Gopalaraj Vamshavali*, Supushpa Deva was the first ruler to introduce caste hierarchy and a private property regime (Vajracarya & Malla, 1985, pp. 122–123). These innovations reflected broader shifts in administrative and economic structures. Epigraphic records like the Anantalingeswor inscription of King Narendradeva (656–665 AD) demonstrate the early institutionalization of caste by distinguishing between groups such as Brahmanas and Chandalas (Vajracarya, 1996, p. 487). However, despite these textual

divisions, the Dharmashastric enforcement of caste norms remained relatively weak during this period, as Shaivism, which emphasized transcendence over ritual purity, was dominant in the Kathmandu Valley.

A decisive transformation occurred in the 13th century under Raja Krachalla in western Nepal. In 1223 AD, Krachalla issued a copperplate from the Balesvara temple in Sui (Kumaon), recording the invitation of Bhatta Narayana Bangaja, a Brahmana from Bengal, to instruct the ruling elite in Dharmashastra and Jyotishsastra (Adhikary, 1997, pp. 159–163). This move not only strengthened the ideological control of the elite but also established a precedent for using religious texts to legitimize socioeconomic hierarchies. The introduction of Brahmanical education was accompanied by economic privileges such as tax exemptions and land grants, reinforcing disparities across caste lines.

The disintegration of the Khasa polity in the late 14th century was driven in part by conflicts over caste and land ownership. The once-fluid Khasa identity was reified into a rigid caste framework, marginalizing occupational groups such as Kamis, Damais, and even ascetic sects like the Dashnamis and Kanphatas (Adhikary, 1997, pp. 44–45). These developments marked a turn toward increasingly hereditary and restrictive social categories, reflecting a broader trend of caste consolidation.

In the Kathmandu Valley, Jayastithi Malla (r. 1370–1395 AD) undertook systematic efforts to solidify caste hierarchy through religious and legal reforms. By proclaiming himself an incarnation of both Rama and Buddha, he crafted a dual religious legitimacy (Vajracarya & Malla, 1985, pp. 131, 133). He invited five Brahmana scholars from the Gangetic plains to codify the legal system using *Manusmriti* and *Narada Smriti*. This initiative marked a turning point: it not only formalized caste distinctions but also redefined landholding rights.

The first legal code during his reign allowed for the buying, selling, and mortgaging of land, undermining older communal land systems influenced by Shaiva norms (Acharya & Narharinath, 2004, p. 90). A second legal code classified society into four varnas and thirty-six castes, each assigned specific duties, ritual roles, and restrictions. A third law criminalized caste mobility and enforced hereditary occupational roles, foreclosing avenues for social advancement (Acharya & Narharinath, 2004, p. 90).

Professional guilds (*gaustikas*), once based on skill and function, were transformed into fixed caste categories. This shift encompassed priests, artisans, tax collectors, and others. Among Newars, the Jyapus became the largest agrarian caste, while Jaisi Brahmins—formerly respected ritual specialists—were demoted and reclassified as Shresthas, positioned below Brahmins and Kshatriyas (Pradhan, 1991, p. 30; Wright, 2004, p. 126). Over time, this hardened into a Newar caste system comprising sixty-four distinct groups (Acharya & Narharinath, 2004, pp. 91–92).

By the 19th century, caste became deeply entrenched in state legislation. A decree from 1837 AD prohibited Magars from accepting food prepared by artisan castes, illustrating the extent of ritual segregation (Nepali, 2003, p. 136). The process culminated in the *Muluki Ain* of 1854, drafted under Jang Bahadur Rana. With assistance from Brahmana advisors in Rautahat, the code stratified the entire population into four broad categories: *Tagadhari* (sacred-thread wearers), *Namasinya Matwali* (non-enslavable alcohol drinkers), *Masinya Matwali* (enslavable alcohol drinkers), and "impure" castes (Hofer, 2004, pp. 1–2, 10). This codification not only racialized caste but also reinforced ethnic hierarchies, subordinating indigenous Sino-Tibetan groups and artisans to the lowest rungs of society.

Although the 1963 *Muluki Ain* was replaced under King Mahendra in a legal gesture toward caste equality, the structural inequalities established by centuries of caste-based governance endured. Legal abolition failed to dismantle the socio-economic mechanisms that upheld caste privilege. Political offices, property ownership, and educational opportunities continued to reflect historical hierarchies, underscoring the limitations of legal reform in overturning deeply embedded systems of domination.

Contemporary Contradictions: Economy, Class, and Governance

Contemporary Nepal reflects historical patterns of inequality under new global conditions. Nepal's remittance-driven economy contributes nearly 23% of its GDP (World Bank, 2023), yet it exacerbates class divides between rural households and urban elites. Simultaneously, the country's dependency on imports has weakened local production, reinforcing economic dependency and inequality.

In February 2025, Nepal was re-listed on the FATF grey list due to failures in implementing anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorist financing (CFT) protocols, particularly in high-risk sectors like cooperatives and real estate (Kathmandu Post, 2025, p. 3). Of the 40 recommendations set by FATF, Nepal had met only 21, highlighting systemic weaknesses (The Economic Times, 2025, p. 5). This has damaged investor confidence, raised transaction costs, and hindered access to international financial aid (The Economic Times, 2025, p. 6). Nepal has committed to administrative and technological reforms to regain compliance (Kathmandu Post, 2025, p. 4).

Conclusion

The Vaiśeṣika philosophical emphasis on the interplay between matter (*dravya*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and action (*karma*) provides a compelling lens to analyze these socio-economic contradictions. Rather than viewing contradictions as developmental failures, they can be seen as indicators of structural imbalance. Shaiva-Tantric philosophy, emphasizing the reconciliation of opposites, suggests a development model that harmonizes material progress with social equity, and global engagement with local autonomy.

Political instability and corruption have further fragmented society. As of 2024, Nepal ranked 108th globally in the Corruption Perceptions Index with a score of 34/100 (Transparency International, 2024), and has undergone 12 government changes since 2008 (Le Monde, 2024). Shaivism's emphasis on *tapas* (inner discipline) and ethical *karma* provides a moral counter-narrative to this instability. Philosophers like Kautilya and Kaṇḍīya emphasized governance rooted in both material well-being and moral purpose (Chakraborti, 1970; Shamasastri, 1951).

Drawing from both historical experience and philosophical traditions, a vision of Nepali society emerges that values dynamic unity over rigid hierarchy. The materialist realism of Vaiśeṣika, interpreted through a Shaiva-tantric lens, offers a model for understanding justice as balance—where contradiction becomes the ground of transformation, and spirituality is not a retreat from the material world but a deeper engagement with it.

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