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A History of Nepal

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Introduction

Nepal, cradled atop the majestic peaks of the Himalayas, is a nation whose history is as complex and layered as the mountains that define its landscape. From the earliest evidence of human habitation to the formation of a modern republic, Nepal's past is a fascinating tapestry woven from migration, conquest, dynasty, religion, and the relentless drive for self-determination. Its unique geography—landlocked by powerful neighbors India and China—has shaped both its isolation and its vital importance as a crossroads of cultures, religions, and trade routes throughout the centuries.

This book, "A History of Nepal," seeks to unfold the epic narrative of a nation that, despite its relatively small size, has played a significant and sometimes surprising role in the broader history of South Asia. Nepal's story begins thousands of years ago, with prehistoric settlers whose legacy is etched in ancient tools and artifacts buried in the Siwalik hills. As waves of peoples arrived—Tibeto-Burmans, Indo-Aryans, and others—they forged a diverse and vibrant society that continues to shape Nepal's unique cultural mosaic today.

Our journey traces the succession of dynasties that reigned over the Kathmandu Valley and beyond, each contributing their own innovations, traditions, and challenges. The early Kirat rulers are credited with establishing the first known system of centralized governance, while the Licchavis ushered in a golden age of culture, architecture, and social organization. The transitional Thakuri era and the illustrious Malla dynasty further enriched the country through advances in the arts, literature, and urban development. Each period faced its own trials, including political fragmentation and foreign threats, yet each left an indelible mark on the social, religious, and political DNA of Nepal.

The advent of the Gorkha kingdom and the subsequent unification of Nepal under the Shah dynasty marked a turning point that would shape modern Nepal. The vision and actions of Prithvi Narayan Shah not only consolidated a patchwork of kingdoms into a single nation but also introduced policies that kept Nepal distinct and relatively isolated even as neighboring regions became increasingly entangled in the collisions of empire. The Shah rulers, and later the powerful Rana prime ministers, guided Nepal through times of both turbulence and reform, navigating internal strife and the growing influence of regional and global powers.

History does not stand still, and neither has Nepal. The twentieth and early twenty-first centuries brought new challenges: calls for democracy, the tumult of revolution, civil war, and finally, the emergence of a republic. Today, Nepal faces the ongoing task of forging a stable path forward, informed by its past yet eager to create a future

grounded in justice, inclusion, and prosperity. This book invites readers to explore every chapter of this remarkable country's story—its triumphs and tragedies, continuities and ruptures, and the enduring quest of its people to shape their own destiny.

As we embark on this historical exploration, it becomes clear that Nepal's identity cannot be reduced to a single narrative or perspective. Instead, it is the product of centuries of change, adaptation, negotiation, and resilience. "A History of Nepal" aims to provide a comprehensive account for those who wish to understand not only what happened, but why—and how the echoes of the past continue to resound in the life of the nation today.

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CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Foundations: Early Inhabitants of Nepal

Long before the rise of dynasties and the carving of stone inscriptions, the land that would one day be called Nepal was a canvas for the earliest chapters of human history in the Himalayas. Unlocking the secrets of these primordial times requires a different kind of detective work, one that relies on the silent testimony of stone tools, ancient riverbeds, and the fossilized remains of creatures long gone. It's a story pieced together by archaeologists and geologists, revealing a landscape very different from the one we see today, yet one that was nonetheless home to early human populations.

The Siwalik hills, those rugged foothills that form the southern edge of the Himalayas, have been particularly generous in offering glimpses into Nepal's deep past. Here, researchers have unearthed evidence of human activity stretching back hundreds of thousands of years. Discoveries of palaeolithic, mesolithic, and neolithic tools in districts like Dang provide tangible proof of early human presence and their evolving technologies. These aren't just scattered rocks; they are the remnants of a world where survival depended on crafting implements for hunting, gathering, and eventually, farming.

Imagine the scene: vast alluvial plains, winding rivers, and dense forests, a rich environment for early hominins. Hand axes and other stone tools found in alluvial deposits along the Babai River in the Dang Valley, some dating back as far as 1.8 million years, suggest that early forms of humans were present in this region. These tools, part of what is known as the Acheulean culture in the broader Indian subcontinent, indicate a certain level of sophistication in toolmaking. The presence of such ancient artifacts in the Siwaliks was, in some ways, a surprising find, as these early tool-making hominids weren't typically thought to have ventured into mountainous tracts.

As time marched on, human populations in the Siwaliks adapted and refined their techniques. Finds of stone tools and flakes dating from 300,000 to 30,000 years ago in the Dang Valley suggest continuous occupation through different climatic periods. The transition from the Palaeolithic to the Mesolithic era, roughly 10,000 years ago, is marked by the appearance of smaller, more refined tools like microliths, blades, and scrapers. These indicate changes in hunting and gathering strategies, perhaps a greater reliance on smaller game or more specialized foraging techniques in the changing environment.

The Neolithic period, beginning around 10,000 years ago and extending to about 4,000 years ago, saw even more significant shifts in human lifestyle. Evidence from sites like Tilaurakot and the Dang Valley reveals the development of agriculture and animal husbandry. The presence of polished stone tools and pottery indicates settled communities engaged in farming, a major departure from the nomadic lifestyle of their ancestors. These early farmers were laying the groundwork for more complex societies and permanent settlements.

While the archaeological evidence paints a picture of early human presence, the question of who these people were and where they came from is a more complex one, relying on a combination of archaeology, linguistics, and genetic studies. It is believed that people from the Indus Valley Civilization, a major Bronze Age civilization in the Indian subcontinent, may have been among the earliest inhabitants of what is now Nepal and adjoining areas. This suggests a connection, perhaps through trade or migration, with this sophisticated urban culture to the south.

Another group that may have inhabited the area before the arrival of later peoples were the Dravidian people. Their history in the Indian subcontinent predates the Bronze Age. While direct archaeological evidence of a widespread Dravidian presence in ancient Nepal is debated, linguistic studies suggest the possibility of Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic language speakers in Nepal before the dominance of Tibeto-Burman languages. Some legends even speak of early rulers or inhabitants who might be linked to Dravidian origins.

Waves of migration have been a defining feature of the peopling of Nepal. By 4000 BCE, Tibeto-Burman people had begun to arrive, likely from Tibet and possibly via Myanmar and northeast India. These groups were significant early settlers, particularly in the highlands and hilly regions. Later, ethnic groups of Indo-Aryan origin migrated from the Indo-Gangetic Plain in northern India to the southern parts of Nepal.

Among the groups considered native to the central Terai region are the Tharus. The Tharus are a Tibeto-Burman group who have also mixed significantly with Indian populations. Their history in the Terai is ancient, with some accounts placing them there since at least the 10th century. There are varying theories about their origins, with some Rana Tharus in western Nepal claiming Rajput ancestry and migration from Rajasthan in the 16th century, although this is disputed by many scholars. Another perspective suggests the Tharu people might be descendants of the Shakya dynasty, to which Gautama Buddha belonged.

The question of early inhabitants is not just about identifying potential ancestral groups but also understanding the dynamic interactions and cultural exchanges that occurred as different peoples arrived and settled in Nepal. The presence of diverse linguistic families, including Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman, speaks to the complex

layers of migration and settlement that have shaped Nepal's demographic landscape. The intermingling of these groups over millennia has created the rich ethnic and cultural mosaic that characterizes Nepal today.

The archaeological findings in the Siwaliks, though sometimes fragmented and requiring careful interpretation, provide a vital foundation for understanding Nepal's earliest history. They demonstrate that this mountainous region, often perceived as isolated, was in fact part of a broader network of early human movement and development in South Asia. The stone tools, the signs of early agriculture, and the potential links to larger civilizations like the Indus Valley offer tantalizing clues about the lives of the people who first called this land home, setting the stage for the historical periods that would follow.

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