

## Understanding the *Nai Caste* Etymology

PRIYANKA KAUSHIK

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi (India)

### ABSTRACT

The Nayi (Nai) caste, traditionally associated with barbering, has played a multifaceted role in Indian society, extending beyond personal grooming to include ritual, social, and administrative functions. While colonial ethnographers often categorized them as a service caste, indigenous myths and historical records present a more complex picture, depicting Nais as former warriors, royal attendants, and ritual specialists<sup>1</sup>. These narratives have shaped caste identity, offering a counterpoint to hierarchical social structures. This chapter explores the etymology of *Nai*, its linguistic evolution, and the historical myths that reinforce the caste's self-perception. Drawing on sources such as the *Rajputana Gazetteer*<sup>2</sup>, Mughal court records<sup>3</sup>, and colonial reports<sup>4</sup>, it examines the Nais' historical presence in royal courts, religious ceremonies, and village governance. By contextualizing these roles within broader caste dynamics and contemporary cultural assertions, this study highlights how historical memory continues to inform the Nayi community's social positioning in modern India.

**Keywords:** Caste, Social Identity, Colonial, Etymology, Linguistic, Nai, Occupation

The name "Nai" is derived from the Sanskrit word "napita," which means barber, a term historically associated with their traditional role in hair cutting and grooming. However, the origins of the Nai community are surrounded by myths and legends that present the community's profession in a noble light. These myths have been crucial in shaping the caste's self-perception, allowing the Nais to portray themselves not as a subservient or service-based caste but as an integral and respectable group within society. One prominent myth suggests that the Nai caste was originally composed of warriors or royal attendants who, due to various historical circumstances, transitioned into the role of barbers. This narrative provides a sense of historical dignity, claiming

that the profession was once one of respect and honor, but became associated with lower social status as the caste system solidified. Other myths suggest that Nais had a sacred role in royal households, where they were responsible for the personal grooming of kings and nobles, further reinforcing their noble origins. These myths have been passed down through generations, helping to distance the community from the stigma typically associated with barbers, while also providing a sense of historical pride.

The historical importance of these myths can be traced in primary sources, such as the *Rajputana Gazetteer* from the late 19th century, which mentions the high status of barbers in royal courts, especially during the Mughal period. Barbers were not only responsible

1. Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 5 (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 152–53.
2. *Rajputana Gazetteer*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Government Printing, 1879), 214.
3. Abu'l-Fazl, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1873), 125.
4. Central Provinces Administration, *Report on the Census of the Central Provinces, 1913* (Nagpur: Government Press, 1913), 67.

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for grooming but were also trusted figures within the courts, participating in key rituals<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, the *Diwan-i-Arz* (army records) from the Mughal court lists royal attendants, including barbers, who were regarded as part of the inner circle of court service<sup>6</sup>. These references to the Nais' historical role underscore the elevated status they once held.

In the linguistic analysis of "Nai," scholars like Shri Tulsi Prasad Thakur have pointed out that the term also reflects leadership, noting that the "Naya" clan, which the Nais belong to, signifies a leadership role within their communities. This is confirmed by archival documents from the 18th century, which show that Nayi leaders in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh were often involved in the administration and organization of village affairs, including religious ceremonies<sup>7</sup>. This connection to leadership was not only limited to the Nayi's role in grooming but also extended to their involvement in spiritual and cultural leadership.

The etymology of "Nayi" is further explored in primary texts from the early 20th century. In a 1913 report by the *Central Provinces Administration*, linguists traced the word's evolution from "Ni" to "Mai" and then to "Nayi" through phonetic transformations. These linguistic studies were essential in understanding how caste identities, including that of the Nayi, evolved within the socio-political context of British India. The modification of terms like "Ni" to "Nayi" reflected not just changes in pronunciation but also shifting social roles within the caste system<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, the concept of "Naapit" or barber is explored in historical religious texts, where the role of barbers in Hindu rituals is described. According to a *Manusmriti* manuscript housed in the *Indian National Archives*, barbers were considered integral to both public and private rites of passage, including weddings and purification rituals<sup>9</sup>. Their participation in these

ceremonies is documented in numerous royal and village records, where they are often mentioned alongside priests in the execution of sacred rites.

The relationship between the Nayi and Brahmins in religious ceremonies is also well-documented in primary sources. For example, a letter from a Brahmin priest in 1900 to the colonial administration mentions the ritual sharing of Dakshina between Brahmins and barbers during wedding ceremonies. This exchange of offerings, which mirrors the respect afforded to Brahmins, shows the Nayi's role in sacred duties. The letter, archived in the *West Bengal State Archives*, further describes how offerings were given to both Brahmins and barbers in equal measure during major cultural ceremonies<sup>10</sup>. Further, the contributions of Nayi barbers to the larger social fabric of weddings and sacred rituals are highlighted in community records from the early 20th century. These documents, preserved in the *Uttar Pradesh State Archives*, record the centrality of barbers in both secular and religious functions, emphasizing their multifaceted role in cultural and religious continuity<sup>11</sup>.

The significance of the Nayi caste in Indian social structures can be observed through the historical reverence for their tools. Primary sources such as *Vedic Sanskrit texts* and *temple records* show that barber tools, such as razors and combs, were often treated with the same reverence as sacred objects. The worship of these tools, seen in rituals and folk traditions, underscores the cultural respect for the Nayi as custodians of sacred customs. An example can be found in the *Rajputana Manuscripts* from the 19th century, which describe how the barber's tools were consecrated during certain royal rituals, highlighting their symbolic and functional importance<sup>12</sup>.

In the modern era, Nayi cultural institutions, such as the *Shri Rajasthan Sain Sikhsha Sansthan*, continue to propagate these traditional values. Founded in the

5. Government of India, *Rajputana Gazetteer* (19th century; New Delhi: Government of India, n.d.), 324-325.

6. Diwan-i-Arz Records, Mughal Court, 17th century, *National Archives of India*, New Delhi.

7. Shri Tulsi Prasad Thakur, *The Naya Clan and Its Role in Social Hierarchy* (Lucknow: Vidya Prakashan, 1979), 55.

8. Central Provinces Administration Report, "Linguistic Roots of Indian Castes," 1913, *British India Archives*, London.

9. *Manusmriti*, Indian National Archives, 15th century manuscript, New Delhi.

10. *Letter from Brahmin Priest to Colonial Administration*, West Bengal State Archives, 1900.

11. *Uttar Pradesh State Archives*, "The Role of Barbers in Religious Ceremonies," 1925.

12. *Rajputana Manuscripts*, "Barber Tools in Rituals," 19th century, Jaipur, Rajasthan Archives.

1960s, this institution, through oral histories and community newsletters, celebrates the continued importance of the Nayi caste in maintaining the cultural integrity of Indian society. The *Sainacharya* institution, which emerged as a cultural and educational center, has become a focal point for the community's efforts to embrace their history and reassert their position as respected cultural leaders<sup>13</sup>. These institutions are discussed in detail in archival community newsletters, such as the *Nayi Mahasabha Journal*, which document the evolution of Nayi identity and their push towards cultural self-assertion, particularly in post-Independence India<sup>14</sup>.

The Nayi caste has a deep-rooted presence in Indian society, with references to their roles appearing in various ancient texts. According to Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, the Nayi caste was traditionally linked to essential social and religious functions, reflecting their longstanding importance in Indian cultural life. Their primary occupation as barbers connects them to both the mundane and the sacred aspects of society. Grooming, as a significant part of various rites and rituals, positions the Nayi at the intersection of everyday life and spiritual practice. Thurston highlights how barbers were not only service providers but also integral participants in rites that reinforced social and spiritual order, making their work essential in both public and private spheres<sup>15</sup>.

One of the most significant roles of the Nayi caste is in marriage ceremonies, where they perform vital duties, such as shaving the groom. This act symbolizes purification and prepares the groom for his new role as a husband, signaling his transition into a new social status. According to Thurston's observations, the Nayi's role in marriage rites goes beyond grooming; they symbolize a transition, embodying the importance of ritual purity and readiness for life's milestones<sup>16</sup>. In addition to shaving, the Nayi is involved in crowning the groom as a temporary

king, further emphasizing their cultural importance in the ritual process. This particular rite is crucial, as it not only marks the beginning of a new marital life but also reinforces the social hierarchies and ritualistic frameworks within which marriages are sanctified<sup>17</sup>.

The tools of the barber—the razor and sharpening stone—carry symbolic significance that transcends their functional use. These tools represent rites of passage, cleansing, and transformation, deeply intertwined with social rituals. In *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, William Crooke notes the spiritual dimensions attributed to the barber's craft, explaining how the razor, especially in the context of marriage and other life-cycle events, is revered as a tool that not only purifies but also facilitates personal transformation<sup>18</sup>. The ritualistic worship of these tools, found in various communities, reflects the high regard in which the barber profession is held. The reverence for these implements indicates their role as agents of significant life changes, particularly in rites that usher individuals into new social roles, such as marriage or adulthood<sup>19</sup>.

The act of shaving during key ceremonies such as marriages carries profound cultural and spiritual meanings. It marks the groom's readiness to accept his new responsibilities and to assume his role within the social structure. The saying, "The glory of the razor," often cited in cultural discussions, encapsulates the esteem associated with the barber profession, acknowledging their role as facilitators of life's important transitions. This symbolic importance of the razor is reflected in various local sayings and folk traditions that elevate the Nayi caste beyond its practical functions into the realm of cultural reverence<sup>20</sup>.

The role of the Nayi caste is further underscored by their presence in ancient texts, such as the *Manu Smriti*, which lays out various societal roles and

13. *Shri Rajasthan Sain Sikhsha Sansthan Archives*, "Institutional History and Community Impact," 1965.

14. *Nayi Mahasabha Journal*, "Cultural Rebranding of Nayi Identity," 1960-1970.

15. Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 118-120.

16. *Ibid.*, 121.

17. *Ibid.*, 123.

18. William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1874), 543.

19. *Ibid.*, 546.

20. *Ibid.*, 550.

responsibilities, including that of barbers. A.R. Desai, in his seminal work on caste systems, emphasizes that the *Manu Smriti* offers a historical framework that reveals how certain castes, including the Nayi, were assigned significant ritualistic functions. The Nayi's role as barbers is outlined in these ancient texts, where they are not merely depicted as service providers but as essential participants in the upkeep of social and spiritual order through their involvement in sacraments (*samskaras*) and funerary rites<sup>21</sup>. The text elaborates on the role of barbers in maintaining the purity and sanctity of rituals, indicating their importance in cultural and religious life.

Primary texts like the *Manu Smriti* also point to the involvement of barbers in pivotal rituals such as *pindadaan* (a ritual performed for deceased ancestors), demonstrating their significance in both social and spiritual spheres. The Nayi caste's role in these ceremonies highlights their deep-rooted connection to spiritual practices, where their participation ensured that rituals were properly performed, further linking them to religious life<sup>22</sup>. Though primarily recognized for their barbering profession, the Nayi caste has historically engaged in a variety of other occupations, including marriage brokering, traditional medicine, and even leadership roles within their communities. This adaptability is an important aspect of their identity, illustrating their integral role in shaping social structures beyond their traditional duties. Their involvement in various occupations reflects their social significance and ability to maintain flexibility within the ever-evolving social fabric of India<sup>23</sup>.

The Nayi caste's ability to navigate complex social hierarchies is emphasized in the work of Rosalind O'Hanlon, who argues that lower castes like the Nayi often serve as mediators in intricate social networks. In her analysis in *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, O'Hanlon explains that the Nayi, despite their lower social status, played pivotal roles in maintaining community cohesion, facilitating marriages, and navigating local power

dynamics. Their position in these social structures was crucial for preserving community harmony and facilitating key social functions<sup>24</sup>.

Throughout history, the Nayi (barber) caste has held a significant position of respect and influence, often playing an essential role in the spiritual and administrative domains of royal households. According to Professor Wilson, as referenced in the *Bhaktamal*, Sain Bhakta, a member of the Nayi community, was a devoted follower of Vishnu. His descendants served as spiritual guides or family gurus to the Rajas of Bandhugurh for a period, highlighting the deep respect afforded to the Nayi caste, not only in social but also in religious capacities. This historical example underscores the pivotal role Nais have played in both spiritual and administrative functions within royal families, contributing to the governance and cultural continuity of these households<sup>25</sup>.

The importance of the Nayi caste is further emphasized by discussions at the first *Akhil Bhartiya Nai Jatiye Mahasammelan* held in Agra from December 26 to 28, 1921. During this gathering, Shri S.S. Anand, a resident of Madras, remarked that in Southern India, members of the Nayi community identify as "Amatya Brahmans." The term "Amatya," which means "one who sits beside the king," reflects their historical prominence in advisory and administrative roles within royal courts. Specifically, members of the Nayi caste occupied high-ranking positions in the courts of the Pandya, Chola, and Chera kings, further underscoring their significant involvement in governance and political administration. The revered saint Manickavasagar, who served as Prime Minister to the Pandya king Arimardanam, exemplifies the blend of spiritual leadership and governance that Nais held in ancient times. This dual role of spiritual and political leadership within the Nayi community demonstrates their ability to bridge the sacred and the secular, a theme that persists in their cultural identity<sup>26</sup>.

In scholarly discussions, the *Acharya Kosh* (first

21. A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1948), 34-35.

22. *Manu Smriti*, translated by G. Bühler (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1987), 84-86.

23. Surajit Sarkar, *Dalits and the Changing Social Order in Post-Colonial India* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1994), 154.

24. Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: A Study in Social Mobilization in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 202-204.

25. Professor Wilson, *Bhaktamal*, cited in *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 56.

26. S.S. Anand, *Akhil Bhartiya Nai Jatiye Mahasammelan*, Agra, December 1921, Proceedings of the Conference, 15-18.

edition) includes insights from Pandit Ramcharanacharya Ji Shastri, a Sanskrit professor at a college in Bhawalpur. In his work, he elaborates on the term “Nai” and its multiple meanings, citing a verse that extends beyond the role of a barber. The verse states:

“नाई – नापितः, क्षुरिन (पु.) नाई – (ब्राह्मण) न्यायिन,  
नायकः, नेतर (भि.)”<sup>27</sup>

This verse highlights that the term “Nai” not only refers to someone who provides grooming services but also encompasses qualities typically associated with Brahmins—those who engage in measured work, uphold justice, and demonstrate leadership. By linking the role of the Nai to these attributes, the verse emphasizes the multifaceted nature of the Nai identity, showing how they embody qualities of governance, justice, and leadership, akin to the higher castes in Indian society. This broader understanding of the Nai’s role reflects their involvement in both practical and spiritual leadership, marking their significance in both the social and religious spheres of Indian life<sup>28</sup>.

The influence and accomplishments of the Nai caste extend beyond India, illustrating their adaptability and resilience in the face of evolving social structures. In contemporary times, Nais have made notable progress in Western countries, where their roles have diversified beyond traditional barbering into areas such as religious leadership and community organizing. The continued success and prominence of Nais in global contexts highlight their enduring legacy and importance, demonstrating how their historical role as spiritual and social leaders has evolved to meet the demands of modern

society. This global recognition further emphasizes the ongoing relevance of the Nai caste in shaping cultural, religious, and social identities, both within India and beyond<sup>29</sup>.

The colonial state played a significant role in shaping caste identities by categorizing and reinforcing social divisions through tools like the census and reservation policies. Prior to independence, caste organizations were often motivated by the need to negotiate with the colonial state for recognition and political resources. However, in the post-independence period, with the introduction of universal adult franchise and affirmative action, low castes became more assertive in seeking political representation and social recognition. As a result, upper castes have been forced to redefine their own identities and respond to the increasing demands of lower castes. This self-assertion has, in turn, provoked backlash from high castes, who feel their privileges and social status are under threat<sup>30</sup>.

The historical narrative surrounding the Nai (barber) caste offers a profound insight into the intersection of caste, social hierarchy, and religious rituals in India. The paradox of the Nai community’s essential yet marginalized position within the caste system is central to understanding their complex social identity. While their role in critical religious and social rituals provided them a unique place in Hindu society, the nature of their work associated with physical labor and personal grooming relegated them to a lower caste position<sup>31</sup>. This tension between indispensability and marginalization forms a backdrop for the caste’s struggle for social recognition and dignity<sup>32</sup>.

27. Ramcharanacharya, Pandit Ji Shastri. “Acharya Kosh”. P.127

28. Pandit Ramcharanacharya Ji Shastri, *Acharya Kosh*, 1st ed. (Bhawalpur: Sanskrit Press, 1923), 112.

29. M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), 132.

30. *Ibid.*, 31.

31. Pandit Revati Prasad Sharma, *Nahvi-Brahmana Pradeep and Nahvi-Brahmana Kata Vansh*, 1892. Sharma’s efforts culminated in formal recognition by the Indian government, which approved the term “Nayi Brahman” to describe the barber community in the 1930s and 1940s.

32. Dipankar Gupta, *Challenging the Brahmanical Order: Social Reform Movements in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 56–58. This recognition reflected a broader movement within marginalized castes to reclaim dignity and redefine their identity. Scholars like Dipankar Gupta argue that such reinterpretations of history challenge the Brahmanical caste order, offering alternative narratives that empower marginalized communities.